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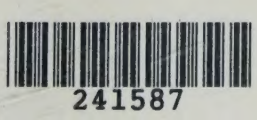

TO THE RESCUE!

LIFE-SAVING AT ABERDEEN, 1802—1924

by

J.L. DUTHIE

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LIFE-SAVING AT ABERDEEN, 1802—1924

by

J.L. DUTHIE

RAINBOW BOOKS, 171 VICTORIA ROAD, ABERDEEN AB1 3ND

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ISBN A1610

'For all that has been said of the love that certain natures (on shore) have professed to feel for it, for all the celebrations it has been the object of in prose and song, the sea has never been friendly to man'.

Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In writing this history I have incurred a number of debts to different individuals and organisations. Those who could provide assistance gave their time generously and their help enthusiastically. I have been loaned a number of books, given permission to quote from a variety of written sources, granted ready access to archival material, allowed to reproduce some rare photographs and given much in the way of first-hand information by some of the older Fittie residents. It would be the height of ingratitude if I did not acknowledge my indebtedness to the following people and organisations: Judith Cripps, City Archivist, Towns House, Aberdeen; John Turner, Capt. Brian Atkinson and Barclay Braithwaite, Harbour Board Office, Regent Quay, Aberdeen; Moira Henderson, Elma Garden, Catherine Taylor and Diana Edmonds, Aberdeen Central Library, Rosemount Viaduct; W.N. Menzies, MacBean Room, King's College, Aberdeen; William Baxter, 2 North Square, Footdee; Daisy Catto (née Guyan), 1 South Square, Footdee; Donald Smith, 8 Ogilvie Crescent, Kintore; James Henderson, Cosy Cottage, Skene Place, Dyce; Dr Brian Taylor, School of Cultural and Community Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton; Andra Noble, 49 George Street, Fraserburgh; Annie and Charlie Duthie, 267 West Road, Fraserburgh; Lynda Frampton, 36 Caiesdykes Drive, Aberdeen; Aberdeen Journals, Lang Stracht, Mastrick, Aberdeen; Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Dept., Schoolhill, Aberdeen; Andrew Cluer, Lantern Books Ltd., North-East Folkore Collection, 52 Albert Street, Aberdeen; George Flett, 5 Lamb's Crescent, Horsham, Sussex.

Jake Duthie

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Printed by Rainbow Enterprises, 171 Victoria Road, Aberdeen AB1 3ND

INTRODUCTION

At a ceremony on the River Dee, in mid-September 1927, the Royal National Life-boat *'Emma Constance'* was named and handed over to the Aberdeen committee of the R.N.L.I. With two 75 horse power engines and a top speed of 9½ knots, *'Emma Constance'* was Aberdeen's first motor life-boat. She was also the first R.N.L.I. life-boat to be appointed to the Aberdeen life-saving station. It is commonly understood nowadays that the existence of a life-boat service means the presence of the R.N.L.I. This was not always the case. For almost a century and a quarter before the *'Emma Constance'* — from 1802 until 1924 — Aberdeen had its own life-saving service, run by local bodies connected with the harbour. Aberdeen was the last of Britain's more important life-boat stations to be drawn into the R.N.L.I. When the Institution took over in 1925, the Aberdeen service comprised two pulling (oared) life-boats, their gear and housings, as well as three sets of rocket apparatus with their life-lines, cradles and tackle.

The rescue missions, the management, manning and maintenance of the Aberdeen life-saving service are a revealing chapter in the harbour's history. Hitherto, the story of the local life-boat service has been limited to a slim, typewritten list of the rescue missions and the lives saved between 1846 and 1924 — a total of 674 persons being listed as saved (1). Apart from the skimpiness of this information, there are a number of reasons why a history of the local life-saving service should be produced. The list is inaccurate in its dating of many rescue missions, the names of the ships wrecked and its claim of 674 lives saved.

Aberdeen's life-saving service may also have been the object of a good deal of misplaced local pride. There can be no questioning the selfless, deliberate courage of the Fittie pilots who made up the greater part of the boats' crews. They were the bravest of men, who exhausted themselves and endangered their lives in saving total strangers as well as relatives and close friends. Yet, despite the life-boatmen's valour, the efficient operation of the service had three times been openly questioned and searchingly investigated — in 1852-53, 1874 and 1923. The merits of local management had to be weighed against membership of the R.N.L.I. — the organisation which specialised in building and running Britain's life-boats. It is possible that Aberdeen Harbour would have been better to turn over its life-boat service to the R.N.L.I. long before 1924. The question of its efficiency underlies the whole of this history of Aberdeen's life-saving service.

Queen's Links
Battery
FOOTDEE
VICTORIA DOCK
WATERLOO QUAY
YORK STREET
EMPBUILDING YARDS
TIDAL HARBOUR
ALBERT BASIN
CRAVING DOCK
PROVOST MAT
ALBERT QUAY
POINT LAW
CURING YARDS
THE ESPLANADE
RIVER DEE
TORRY
Torry Farm
Schools
VICTORIA ROAD
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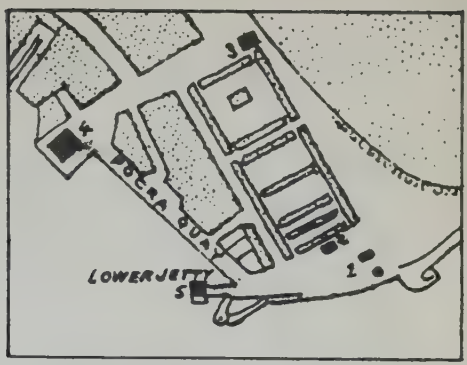


1. 1st life-boat shed, built c.1810.
2. 2nd life-boat shed, built 1853.
3. 3rd life-boat shed, built 1874.
4. 4th life-boat shed, built 1877.
5. 5th life-boat shed, built 1890.

E N BAY

PIER

NORTH

CHANNEL

SOUTH BREAKWATER

SHORT NESS

GREY HOPE BAY

Girdleness Lighthouse

BAY OF NIGG

CHAPTER 1
THE EARLY DAYS OF ABERDEEN'S SHIPWRECK SERVICE

A life-boat's most important qualities are: that it be unsinkable because it is so buoyant; that it should automatically return to the upright when overturned by heavy seas; that it should be very stable in the first place and not be easily capsized; that it should quickly empty itself of any water which comes aboard; and that it should be a very seaworthy, fast-moving, manoeuvrable craft. While no one man can claim to be responsible for designing and constructing a boat which combined all these qualities, the South Shields boat-builder Henry Greathead is credited with launching the first purpose-built life-boat. (2) Built specially for saving lives at sea, Greathead's *Original* was launched in January 1790. The boat was thrity feet long, extremely high at stem and stern, was steered by a sweep oar and needed ten oarsmen to pull her. She was not self-righting and the water she took on board had to be baled out by hand. By 1804 Greathead had built a total of thirty two such life-boats, one of which had been purchased for Aberdeen.

Along the north-east coast of Scotland, January 1800 — the first month of a new century — began with a prolonged hurricane. In just one week there were thirty shipwrecks. Over eighty Aberdeen seamen lost their lives in what is still the worst maritime disaster in the harbour's history. The immediate reaction in Aberdeen was to get up a public subscription for the money to buy a life-boat similar to Greathead's *Original* . The organisers expected the public to donate generously, so that a local life-boat would be ready for the next emergency. (3) Funds may have been slow in coming in and collections may have dried up altogether as the public's intital shock diminished. Whatever the case, when Aberdeen eventually got its first life-boat — three years later — it was as a present from Alexander Baxter, an Aberdeen-born merchant resident in London. He donated the life-boat as a mark of affection for his native city. In late January 1803 the Aberdeen whaler *Neptune* carried the boat up from Sunderland.

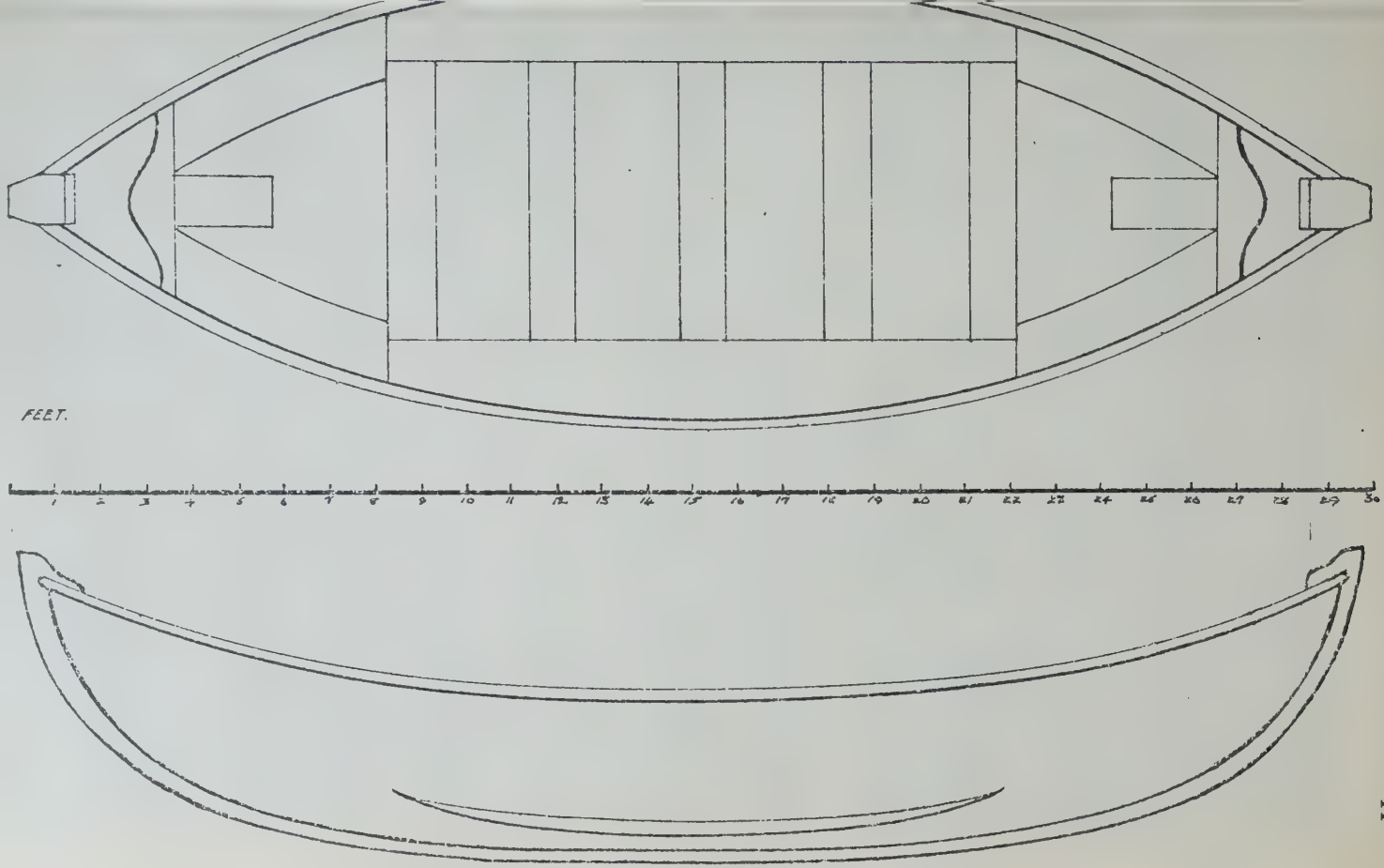
It was just over a year before the life-boat went out on its first rescue mission, when the sailing coaster *Hawk* went ashore at the back of the new North Pier in March 1804. From 1804 to 1820, the life-boat was pulled out on seven rescue missions. In most of these she was successful and managed to save all the crews. (4) The only reports of these emergencies are brief and matter-of-fact, but they do occasionally suggest how drenched and exhausted must the rescuers have been. It was sometimes impossible to reckon where a ship would come ashore

and the rescuers might row their open boat across the harbour bar, through the heavy seas off Aberdeen beach, to land somewhere beyond the River Don.

For instance, in the afternoon of 25th October 1808, a perfect hurricane was blowing from south and south-west. In the relentless wind and driving seas, the collier *Alert* was driven ashore opposite the Broad Hill. 'The Life Boat was immediately launched, and after incredible efforts to gain the vessel, having in the first attempt been driven far to the northwards, they at length succeeded in getting alongside, and took off the crew, who were exceedingly fatigued, and brought them safe on shore.' (5)

The press reports of the early 19th century frequently refer to the readiness and the speed with which the fishermen and pilots of Fittie dragged the life-baot along the shore to the scene of a shipwreck, manned and then launched it. Such reports give the lie to the Aberdeen townsman's ready suspicion that east coast fisherfolk such as the Fittie men prayed for 'a shippie ashore' — putting the prospect of plunder from a wreck above the lives of their fellow seamen. The rumour got round Aberdeen in late 1817 that the fishermen of Collieston had mistreated the crew of the wrecked brig *Mary* of Newcastle and then plundered the vessel. The captain and the crew of the *Mary* wrote separately to the 'Aberdeen Journal', denying the malicious rumours and pointing out that 'the inhabitants did their utmost to save us from the wreck, at the risk of their own lives, and treated us humanely when ashore.' (6) Scratching a living from the sea, the Fittie fisherfolk may have welcomed the gift of jetsam along the shoreline and flotsam in the tide. Their is no evidence of their supposed heartlessness in a storm, other than the townsman's derogatory sneer. The Fittie folk's involvement with the first life-boat is a persuasive testament to their humanity.

The first life-boat was managed by the Shipmasters' Society, a charitable body for retired ships' captains and their widows, which also did humanitarian work about the harbour. The Society provided a carriage for the life-boat, so that it could be quickly pulled along the shore, and launched close to the wrecked ship. To pay for the carriage and reward those who manned the life-boat on dangerous missions, the Society levied a small tax on each vessel entering Aberdeen harbour. This temporary fee enabled the life-boat's managers to set up a fund which soon became self-financing through the interest it drew. (7) The Society also built a wooden house for the boat, to protect it from the weather. This, Aberdeen's first life-boathouse, was built immediately to the north of the Round House, with just the width of a road between them to allow access to the North Pier. So close was the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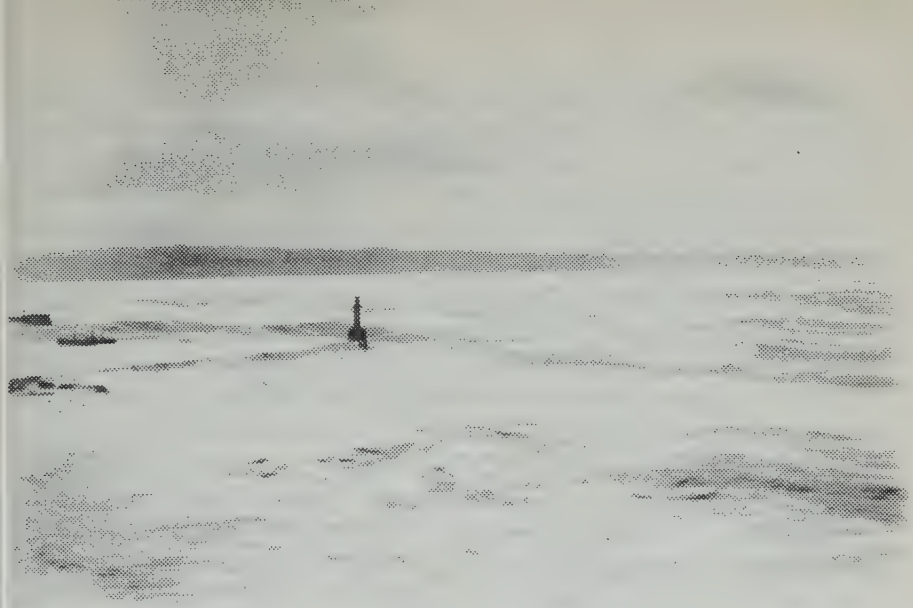
life-boathouse to the sea behind the North Pier that its gates were washed away when a strong, easterly gale coincided with an exceptionally high spring tide.

The Shipmaster's Society had been directed to take over responsibility for managing the life-boat by the Aberdeen city magistrates, but seems to have done so altogether reluctantly. When Aberdeen's first Harbour Commissioners were appointed in 1810, the Shipmasters moved immediately to free themselves from managing the life-boat. They were willing to help as individuals, but not as a body. Instead, they recommended that Captain Freeman, the Captain Pilot at the harbour, be given charge of her. Freeman was already involved in collecting the small, 'life-boat tax' from the ships using the port. He had collected £61 14/- in maintenance dues in the two year period 1808-10. Faced with the Shipmasters' ultimatum, the Aberdeen magistrates and councillors accepted their recommendation on Captain Freeman and directed him to superintend the boat in future.

In early 1811, a sub-committee of the magistracy drew up a short list of regulations for Captain Freeman to follow. He was to choose six persons to help him work the boat in an emergency and to maintain it between times. Each of the six men under his command was to be paid an annual retainer of one guinea. These life-boatmen were also to take the boat out on a training exercise four times a year and were each to receive five shillings when they went out on such a practice.

Early in 1811 also, Mr Gibb, the Harbour Engineer, suggested that a slip or inclined plane should be built beside the first stair on the North Pier. Sheltered from rough water and out of the way of shipping, this slip would be useful for launching the life-boat. The magistrates gave Mr Gibb permission to build the slipway once the weather permitted. This slip, lying between Lower (Shelter) Jetty and Abercrombie Jetty, is still there today.

Life in the early 19th century was much less regulated and organised than it is now. This want of prescribed rules and procedures was reflected in the life-boat service. There were no regular oarsmen. On each rescue mission, the boat was manned by a scratch crew of volunteers. There was always plenty of enthusiastic help in dragging the life-boat to the launching point, but none in returning it to its shed. After a rescue the boat was left lying on the shore, to be pounded by the waves and washed a long way up the coast. Nor was there an established principle that the life-boat should always go out to a shipwreck or that the life-boat alone should attend to rescue work. On several occasions, when a yawl, a sloop or a galliot struck at the harbour bar and got into serious difficulties, the men were rescued by the fishermen and pilots of Fittie in their own boats. (8) In a storm, seamen thrown overboard



Heavy seas around the mouth of Aberdeen Harbour in a gale.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

near the North Pier were sometimes rescued by spectators who threw ropes to them from the pierhead. Even the carpenters and shipbuilders of the Fittie shipyards took an active part in rescuing sailors. Mr Adamson, a prominent local shipbuilder in the early 19th century, saved the crews of two schooners. The vessels had been dragged from their moorings in the harbour by the fast flow of the fresh water from the River Dee and stranded opposite the battery. (9)

Aberdeen Bay and Harbour had their own peculiar dangers for the wooden sailing vessels which plied Britain's coast in the 19th century. The easterly and south-easterly gales which stormed in off the North Sea made the north-east coast a lee shore, towards which brigs, sloops and schooners were driven by the force of the wind. The Aberdeenshire coastline also inclines seaward in a north-easterly direction. This gave a storm-driven ship's master less searoom to manoeuvre his vessel out to sea again if she failed to make the entrance to Aberdeen Harbour and was trapped in the Bay. Even if he held his course successfully for the harbour, the sailor was still not out of danger. If the gale was blowing straight out of the east, a heavy swell would be charging up the channel between the North Pier and the old South Breakwater. If a ship's master went too close to the pier, he risked being dashed against the pierhead by the swell. Alternatively, his vessel could be flung onto the stone platform which sloped outwards several feet from the inner pier wall. This platform, under-shoe or

foundation was usually hidden below the surface of the water. Forced to seek shelter, a sailor might take the harbour entrance at too low a tide; only to find his vessel strike the sea bottom and be forced round onto the rocks behind the North Pier.

One special peculiarity of Aberdeen harbour's entrance is that it also serves as the mouth of a major river. In a gale this made the harbour entrance particularly treacherous and unpredictable, when a heavy swell coincided with a large volume of fresh water flowing out of the River Dee. As she entered harbour in bad weather a vessel's stern could be knocked to port or starboard; or her steering damaged, if a very heavy wave hit her on the quarter. The fresh water from the Dee then tended to force her bow further round. Thereafter, the vessel could yaw wildly and broach between the pierheads. With his ship broadside on to a heavy swell or crashing waves, the man at the wheel lost all control in steering her. She was then in danger of hitting the pier and breaking up against it.

These were the particular conditions which wrecked ships on Aberdeen beach, on or behind the North Pier and in the entrance channel to the harbour.

To understand the exact location of many of the shipwrecks at Aberdeen harbour mouth, one has to appreciate that the North Pier was not always its present length. In 1800, the point of the North Pier extended fifty feet or so beyond the low water mark at the beach. With most of its length within the channel, the pier was more like a knuckle stuck onto the land than an arm reaching out into the sea. By the end of 1812, it had been extended an additional 900 feet seaward, so that it projected two-thirds of its present length out to sea. The end of this new pier sloped gradually into the water. Distressed vessels could all too easily be washed onto this slope, which was studded with rocks at its base. Also at the end of the pier was a flaghouse, where red and green flags were flown to indicate whether vessels could enter harbour or not. Later in the nineteenth century, a set of cone and ball signals was attached to the flag-post and used to transmit more elaborate signals to vessels approaching the harbour. In the mid-1870's, the North Pier was extended a further 500 feet seawards, to its present length.

In a hard, north-easterly gale in March 1820, the brig *Perfect* tried to enter Aberdeen harbour but got too far to leeward and was driven onto the rocky shore south-east of the old breakwater. Quickly launched, the life-boat never reached the *Perfect* . The life-boat herself was driven onto the rocks by the tremendous breakers and a powerful flood tide. Her volunteer crew only just managed to save their own lives. (10) The boat was badly damaged, and quite useless for any

future rescue work. (11) Only a year after the boat had been smashed up, the city fathers let out the life-boat shed to the Aberdeen, Leith and Clyde Steam Boat Company at an annual rent of £2. Occasionally after 1820 one of the Harbour Trustees might enquire into the cost of providing a replacement, but no new boat was bought.(12) For the next twenty years, Aberdeen's life-saving service was without a life-boat.

As local interest in marine rescue fell away, there built up a wave of national enthusiasm for establishing a rescue service all round Britain's coast. Feeding and benefitting from the public's concern, in March 1824 William Hillary formed the Royal National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck. This was the forerunner of today's R.N.L.I.

Apart from placing life-boats at key stations along the coast, the newly-formed Institution provided a number of Preventive Water-Guard Stations (the equivalent of the modern Coastguard) with a set of Captain Manby's Life Apparatus. This was a three to six-inch mortar mounted on a sturdy wooden board, provided with rope carrying handles. The mortar was carried to the scene of a wreck, set up on the shore-line and aimed at the stricken vessel. A small cannon ball with a length of strong, fine line attached was then fired across the deck or rigging of the wreck. (13) Once the shipwrecked sailors got hold of the

One of the Manby mortars used at Aberdeen to fire life-lines to shipwrecked vessels. (photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

life-line, it could be used to rig up a stout rope between the shore and their lurching, wave-engulfed perch in the rigging. A number of sets of Manby apparatus were located on the north-east coast of Scotland in 1824, one being at the Preventive Water-Guard Station, Bridge of Don. It was not long before Captain Manby's invention was in full use.

On 17th January 1825 the grain-loaded *Deveron* left Aberdeen harbour and anchored in the bay. It was blowing very hard from the south-south-east to south-south-west, with a very heavy sea running. The *Deveron* dragged her anchors, lost them and was driven ashore a little to the north of the River Don. Lieutenant Randall R.N., in charge of the Bridge of Don station, found the schooner shipwrecked amidst tremendous surf, when he and his team patrolled the beach at six o'clock in the morning.

In Lt. Randall's own words: 'On the alarm being given, all hands assembled on the beach, with Capt. Manby's apparatus..... No time was to be lost, as the sea was at intervals flying over the schooner; but owing to the wind, and clouds, as it were, of sand blowing along the beach, and the heavy run of the sea, the three first shots broke the line, the coils of which were upset from these causes. The vessel being a long way out, and the run of the sea being so great, I began to fear that the mortar, a twenty four pounder, would not reach her; still, however, I determined on persevering, in spite of every obstacle. I got four stout hands to carry the slide, and the mortar loaded and mounted upon it, and other men to bring the line, and as fast as the run of the sea receded, we advanced towards the vessel, nearing her at least thirty yards by this plan. On attempting to fire, the tube would not go off, and the first sea upset everything. I tried a second time and sent the shot on board, which went down the cabin. A small hawser was then bent onto our line, by which it was hauled from the vessel ashore; and having a coble ready, slip ropes etc were arranged to keep the boat's head to the sea; when Robert Burnie, Edmund Balls and James Arnott of this station, with John Davidson from the Don, volunteered their services to go off with the boat. I was gratified at witnessing the coolness and steadiness of these men when hauled through a most dangerous surf — for by such conduct alone were they enabled to succeed in their gallant and generous undertaking. The coble reached the vessel; and receiving the master and three others, she was hauled ashore in safety.' (14)

All the *Deveron*'s crew were saved, except the mate, Alex Craig, who was washed overboard and lost. For his courage, energy and perseverance, Lt. Randall was awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institution and presented with a handsome snuff box by the Aberdeen Sea Insurance Company.

The Manby apparatus was an important addition in the armoury of local life-saving equipment, though it was under the official control of the National Institution. Its great drawback was the difficulty in passing messages between ship and shore amidst roaring waves and the hectic confusion of imminent disaster. To get round this problem, a cheap, neatly-printed card was produced 'with appropriate representations of the proper signals in every situation of distress by shipwreck at sea, by night or day'. (15) Seamen could buy this printed set of signals from a shop on Castle Street and, from 1828, study them at the back of Mr Innes's yearly tide-tables.

However, when next the Bridge of Don water-guard was called to a shipwreck, the services of the Manby apparatus were not required. The crew of the *Lord Archibald Hamilton* , which went ashore among the Girdleness rocks in August 1829, used a more traditional means of passing a line ashore. The ship's dog swam ashore with the lead line fastened around him. The people who had gathered on the beach then used the line to drag a rope across from the ship. The five of a crew got safely ashore using this rope. (16)

Only six months later, in a January gale, the cargo and passenger-carrying smack *Fame* was driven ashore a little beyond the Black Dog. The Don and Belhelvie water-guard teams reached the spot between nine and ten in the morning. But not before the ship's master, Captain Clark, had floated ashore a small barrel with a line attached to it. With some difficulty the waterguard caught the cask as it tossed madly in the surf. Once a rope had been rigged up between the beach and the smack, the *Fame*'s boat was lowered and seven people, including five passengers, brought safely ashore in it. The two crewmen took the boat back out to the *Fame* , to rescue their nine colleagues still aboard. The rope from the shore gave way, the boat swung round and swamped, and the two selfless crewmen were lost. Manby's apparatus was then brought into use and the remaining nine mariners brought ashore. (17)

As well as being driven ashore on the beach and the rocks, vessels could be wrecked close to the North Pier. So close, that the spectators who always gathered there in a storm could throw out a rope or quite literally grab hold of the ship and the survivors from the pier. In 1822 the schooner *Ossian* , loaded with coal, was driven onto the large stones near the point of the pier. She lay there some time, her bottom striking the rocks very hard, 'but was, by the strenuous exertions of the great numbers of people who hastened to give their assistance, got off.....' (18)

Eight years later, in January 1830, the brig *Grampian* was entering

the harbour among high seas but steered too far to the leeward. At the critical moment of taking the harbour entrance, she had to be hauled up to windward to prevent her drifting onto the Girdleness rocks. Now broadside on to the sea, she was hit by two tremendous waves and hurled up onto the rocks at the end of the North Pier. As the grounded vessel lurched to starboard then port with the action of the waves, her masts would overhang the pier and then swing out to seaward. While the crew climbed the rigging or tied themselves to the deck fittings, over a dozen of the crowd on the pier caught hold of the mast tops and the rigging. With the brig stopped rolling, the master and three of a crew were hauled onto the pier by the spectators-cum-rescuers, who either used the ship's own loose ropes and running rigging or clambered onto the brig itself to lift up an exhausted sailor. (19) The mate and a young seaman were swept overboard and drowned without a cry.

Yet wrecked wooden vessels like the *Grampian* , hurled up on the rocks in a gale, do not go to their deaths silently. Over the endless roar of the sea against the land can be heard the grinding, the cracking, the snapping, the ripping, the smashing — as the rudder is torn away, the bowsprit and masts broken, the deck swept clear of fittings, the sides stove in and the bottom torn out.

The North Pier of Aberdeen harbour also marked the first wreck of a steam ship on the north-east coast. On 11 December 1839 the paddle steamer *Brilliant* left Leith for Aberdeen. She was one of the first of the Aberdeen, Leith and Clyde Shipping Company's steam vessels. During the night she was caught by a terrifying south-easterly gale and lost her captain off the Girdleness when he was thrown overboard by a sudden lurch of the vessel. In making Aberdeen harbour at six-thirty in the morning, the *Brilliant* was overtaken by a succession of heavy seas and driven onto the under-shoeing of the North Pier. Held fast on its projecting foundation, she leaned towards the pier wall, with her fore quarter-deck hove close against it. The Fittie pilots handed the passengers and crew safely ashore, with only one excitable passenger breaking his leg. With everyone ashore, the boilers and fires of the abandoned vessel were left unattended; the furnaces still burned, the boilers had emptied when she struck. These empty boilers overheated and the paddle steamer caught fire. The lurid glow of a burning ship was soon reflected in the low-scudding clouds of a wintry December morning. Her cargo was saved, but fire and sea reduced the *Brilliant* to a total wreck. (20)

If steamers could be wrecked, their introduction also offered a new opportunity to rescue those craft stricken some distance off shore. With its shallow draught, the pulling life-boat was still irreplaceable

for working safely off shallow beaches and jagged, rocky shores. On the other hand, a small paddle tug could steam quickly to a wreck several miles out to sea. On 22nd August 1827, Alexander Hall, Shipbuilder, Footdee, launched Aberdeen's first steam tug — the *Paul Jones* , under the command of Captain Urquhart. With her forty horse power engine, the *Paul Jones* had been bought by a local joint stock company to tow vessels in and out of harbour; replacing the labourers on the pier who hauled them by rope to the harbour entrance. (21) The introduction of the steam tug made possible some new initiative in local rescue work.

Less than a year after her launching, the *Paul Jones* — under her own captain — was sent out to the aid of several Findon and Portlethen fishing boats, caught at sea in a violent, northerly gale. The tug towed three of the boats back to land. (22) Wooden vessels carrying lime were prone to catch fire when the seawater got into the cargo and generated intense heat. When this happened to the *Hind* off Portlethen, she was towed in by the *Paul Jones* and the fire extinguished. (23)

The Inverness smack *Hope* was dismasted in June 1834 in a violent gale off Bervie and her captain reached Aberdeen in the ship's boat. At his request, the *Paul Jones* put to sea, found the smack twelve miles off Aberdeen and thence towed her into harbour. Fitted with a new mast, the *Hope* was ready to sail just two days later. (24)

The following year, during a sudden August gale, the *Paul Jones* failed to locate four Findon fishing boats which were being driven way out to sea by the north-westerly tempest. (25)

Struck by a heavy sea in September 1835, the cargo boat *Olive Branch* was thrown over on her side and in danger of sinking. The *Paul Jones* rescued the crew and towed her into harbour nearly full of water. (26)

Despite the benefits of the steam tug for rescue work there was as yet no question of the paddle steamer replacing the pulling life-boat or of a steam life-boat being introduced. These early tugs took too long to get up steam in an emergency. When the waves were high, the paddles often thrashed uselessly in the air. If struck by a solid lump of water, the steam tug's tall, thin funnel could easily be washed away and the fires drowned out. If the crew were overwhelmed by a wave and the boilers left unattended, the steam tug was likely to meet the same fiery end as the *Brilliant* . Despite the *Paul Jones*'s rescue work and the shore-line activities of the waterguard, Aberdeen still needed a life-boat. In 1839 she was still without one.

CHAPTER 2
THE MID-CENTURY RESCUE SERVICE

In late November 1838, the recently appointed 'Trustees for the Improvement of the Harbour' decided to investigate the 'necessity or propriety of the re-establishment of a life-boat at this port with an efficient crew — the former Boat having several years since become altogether useless.' (27) The Trustees, who for the most part consisted of the City Council and some of its officials, were acting on a proposal by Mr Hadden, Master of Shoreworks. In mid-October that year there had been a four-day-long hurricane along the east coast of Scotland, but providentially no ships had been lost at Aberdeen.

Mr Hadden's and the Trustees' new initiative on providing a pulling life-boat did not arise from a local tragedy but from the most sanctified rescue in national history. On 7th September 1838 Grace Darling and her lighthouse-keeper father had rowed from the Longstone light on the Farne Islands to the nearby wreck of the Dundee steamer *Forfarshire* and saved nine survivors. Though the daughter played a less important role than her father, Grace Darling was lionised by the press, the ballad-singers and the pamphleteers and became Victorian England's first national heroine. Although the 'Aberdeen Journal' twice reported on the wreck of the *Forfarshire* , it did so in plain, factual terms — not even mentioning the Darlings, let alone Grace's heroism. (28) Yet it is unlikely that public officials such as Mr Hadden remained unaware of and uninfluenced by the example of Grace Darling. Whatever the case, Mr Hadden's concern for the plight of shipwrecked mariners seemed more pressing to him than it was to the Trustees. A year later, Mr Hadden was forced to repeat his proposal for the re-establishment of a life-boat at Aberdeen. (29) Very lackadaisically, the Trustees' Visiting Committee, which had been instructed to examine his original proposal, had still not reported back. This second time, the Harbour Committee of Management was delegated to take the question of an efficiently maintained, properly manned Aberdeen life-boat 'into their early consideration'. The Harbour Committee of Management immediately passed on the responsibility to the Visiting Committee again. (30)

The Visiting Committee did act this time. A standard letter was sent off to the harbour masters at Shields, Montrose, Ramsgate and Yarmouth. These officials had the responsibility for some notable, local life-boat services. Seeking information on how best to build and manage a life-boat, the Visiting Committee wanted to know the size, description and cost of the life-boats these east coast harbour masters

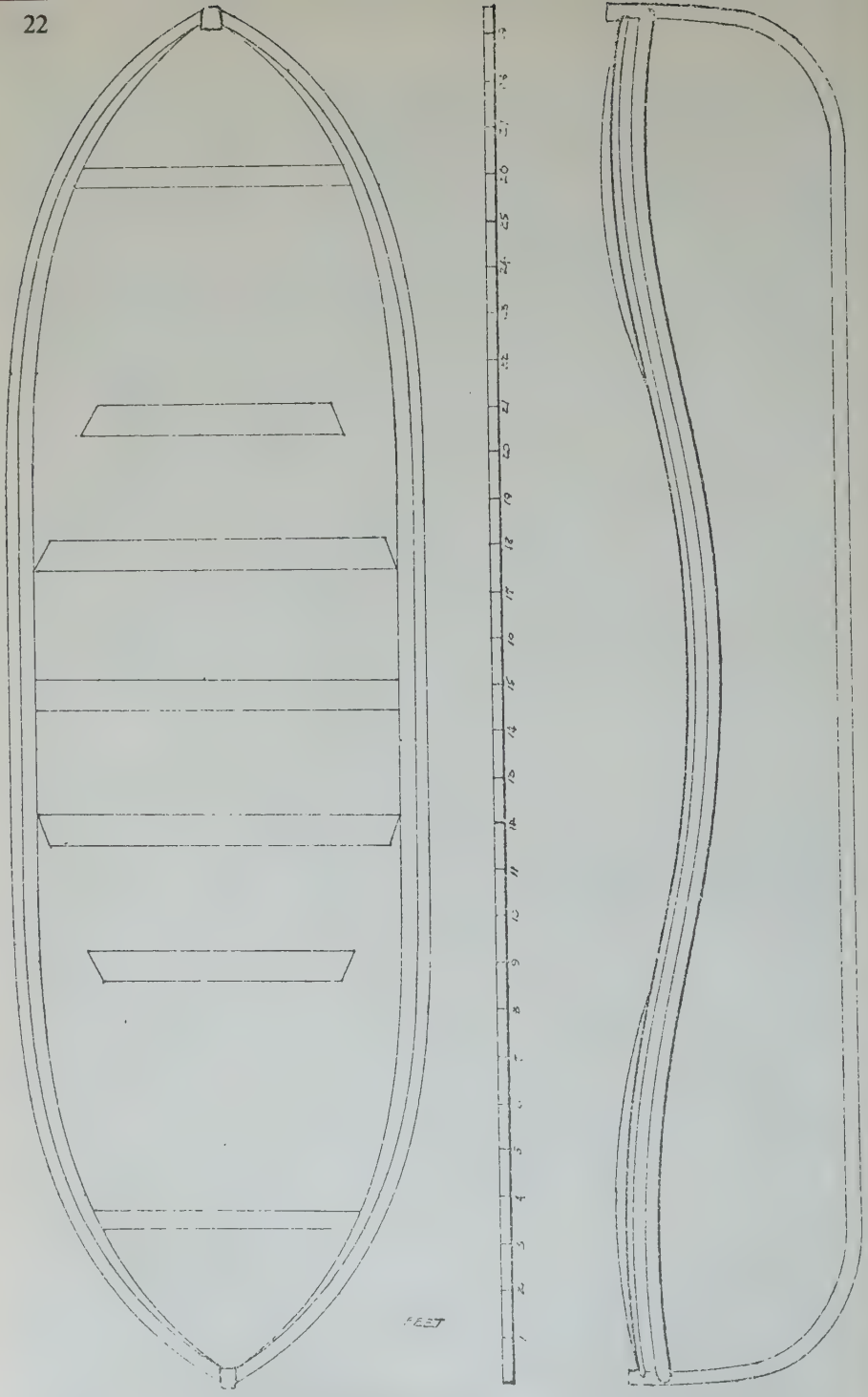
found most suited to rescue work. The committee also wanted to know the names and locations of life-boat builders; the pay and terms of appointment of the crew; the annual expense of a life-boat service and how it was paid for; as well as information on procuring, working and operating a Manby apparatus. (31)

Once the replies were received, including useful information about his mortar from Captain Manby himself, Aberdeen harbour officials estimated that a new life-boat would cost just over £100. After this initial careful consideration of the cost of a life-boat, the Harbour Committee approved and gave instructions for its purchase. This time, the loss of the *Brilliant* at the harbour entrance may have provided the necessary motivation for realising Mr Hadden's project.

The new life-boat was built by Messrs. Wake and Son, of Monkwearmouth on the River Wear near Sunderland. It came north to Aberdeen in February 1841 and was reckoned a very superior, seaworthy boat by a number of competent local shipbuilders and seamen. (32) With their new life-boat on station, the Harbour Committee added a complete set of Dennett's rockets to its rescue equipment. The acquisition of these rockets, lighter and easier to carry than a Manby mortar but serving the same purpose, meant that the local authorities were taking up rescue work from on shore as well as from the sea.

The Harbour Committee also repaired the decaying life-boat house and spent £20 on a new carriage for the boat. (33) Mounted on a four-wheeled, wooden carriage, the life-boat could easily be pulled to the water's edge by a string of people hauling on ropes. If a ship was wrecked several miles from the life-boat house, horses were attached to the carriage and it was pulled up the road or along the beach. Once opposite a distressed vessel, the carriage was run into the foaming surf until its six-foot-high, centre wheels were axle-deep in the water. Judging a favourable moment, when there was deep enough water to ply the oars but no incoming wall of water to overwhelm the life-boat, the coxswain gave the order and the assembled helpers hauled smartly on the ropes which launched the boat into the breakers.

It was less than a year before the new life-boat was called out on its first rescue mission. In late January 1842, as the coal-laden schooner *Tinker* made to enter Aberdeen harbour with some stays missing, she was caught in the bay by a sudden southerly gale and driven onto the beach opposite the Bathing Station. With the sea breaking over her deck and her crew seeking refuge in the *Tinker*'s rigging, some Aberdeen seamen put off in a coble to rescue them. Half-way to the *Tinker* , the coble was capsized by the waves and its impromptu crew were themselves lucky to reach the shore. Under the direction of



The basic design of Aberdeen's second life-boat, purchased 1841.

the Harbour Superintendent and the Master Pilot, the life-boat was taken out of its shed and the carriage hauled to the water by Hall the shipbuilder's horses. A gale-force wind blew searing bursts of sand into the helpers' faces. Remarkably, the Fittie pilots would not help drag the boat through the surf; they were very reluctant to enter her; and, with two exceptions, refused to man the life-boat. With no shortage of volunteers, a scratch crew was got up of the Master Pilot, two pilots, four seamen, two captains and a mate from ships in the harbour. Watched by a large crowd, the life-boat mastered the heavy seas, taking not a drop of water, and rescued the *Tinker*'s exhausted, cold-benumbed crew. (34)

The difficulty with the pilots does not seem to have been a new one. Between the demise of the first life-boat in 1820 and the arrival of the second in 1841, it seems to have been taken for granted that the pilots should accept responsibility for manning the life-boat in a storm. On the other hand, the pilots were reluctant to accept such calls on their personal courage as part of the job. As early as 1834, one of the Harbour Trustees had recommended that the pilots should only be granted their licences on condition that they agreed to man the life-boat. (35) This local wine-merchant, for that was his livelihood, was implicitly rejecting the nationwide principle that men should not be forced to go out on a rescue and that the life-boats should be manned by volunteers only. The brave wine merchant also reckoned without the pilots' wives. When the life-boat was called out in a gale, it was often their women folk who successfully dissuaded the pilots from going out in her. The Harbour Trustees were still tackling the problem of the reluctant pilots when they acquired the new life-boat in 1841.

Part of the difficulty seems to have been the Trustees' own unwillingness to pay a regular, annual retainer to those delegated to stand by the life-boat. Such an annual payment, plus a reward for every successful mission undertaken, had been one of the central principles laid down by William Hillary when he founded the National Institution in 1824. Life-boatmen should not be asked to risk their lives without at least a token reward for their peril. Between 1841 and 1849, there was no mention of any regular retainer being offered to prospective Aberdeen life-boatmen. It was another of Hillary's principles that there should always be a regular, well-trained life-boat crew. The Aberdeen harbour officials contravened this principle as well, by having no proficiency exercises and drawing a crew of twelve from any of two dozen pilots or scores of volunteers. After the *Tinker* fiasco, the Fittie pilots came under pressure from the local press to provide the life-boat with a sufficient crew of men who would always be prepared to man her. As a reward to those involved in the *Tinker* rescue, and

perhaps an inducement to the pilots in the future, the Harbour Committee gave £15 to the life-boat's volunteer crew and £5 to those who went out vainly in the coble. (36) Despite such occasional financial encouragement, the pilots were still unwilling to attend the boat in any emergency. The pilots' refusal troubled the life-boat managers for the next decade.

Even with the arrival of a new life-boat, there were still rescue missions which the steam tug and the Manby mortar were better suited for. The new steam tug *Dorothy* went some distance out to sea in the frost and snow of January 1844, in search of nine Aberdeen fishing boats which were feared missing after a gale. Before they sent her out, the harbour officials had loaded the *Dorothy* with provisions intended to help revive the Torry and Fittie fishermen. The *Dorothy* searched in vain. All nine boats were lost, but the fifty three fishermen were picked up by a naval vessel eleven miles east of Girdleness. (37)

It is worth noting that, although herring fishing had begun at Aberdeen in 1836, the harbour never had the large fleet of undecked sailing drifters which were to be found in their hundreds in the Moray Firth ports further north. Aberdeen was mercifully spared such disasters as that of August 1848, when one hundred Scots fishermen were drowned and one hundred and twenty four herring boats lost or damaged — fifty one of them at Peterhead alone. The Aberdeen life-saving service never had anything on this scale to contend with from fishing boats.

Just one month after the *Dorothy* went out on her fruitless search, and in plain sight of literally thousands of spectators, the Aberdeen steam tug *Samson* brought off one of the most daring rescues in the harbour's history. It was blowing a gale as darkness fell on Friday 23rd February 1844. In the early evening, the sloop *Mary and Margaret* , of Stirling, came ashore opposite the Bathing Station. In the darkness, no one on shore was aware of her plight and during the night her master and one crew member were washed overboard after clinging to the rigging for around ten hours. The other sailor survived because he clung on until the tide went out and then walked ashore, exhausted. The loss of two men before dawn was the prelude to a whole day's excitement at the harbour. With the dismal dawn of Saturday morning, the local clipper *Newcastle* could be seen anchored a mile and a half off the Girdleness. Her rigging was gone, only the stump of her mainmast remained and she was flying distress flags. The *Newcastle* was no 19th-century coffin ship but a stout vessel, launched from the Duthie brothers' shipbuilding yard at Fittie only two years earlier. Even so, it was doubtful if she could ride out such a storm. The crowds around the North Pier muttered their opinion that

The steam tug 'Samson' steaming out over the bar to the Aberdeen-built clipper 'Newcastle', 24 February 1844.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

some rescue mission should be mounted. About noon the life-boat was launched and manned by a scratch crew under Captain Penny — one of 19th century Aberdeen's most famous whaling captains. In spite of their most strenuous efforts, the life-boat crew failed to pull their boat through the breakers at the harbour bar. They were trying to row straight into the teeth of a hurricane. Forced to give up the unequal struggle between human muscle and the raw fury of wind and waves, Captain Penny had his men land the life-boat on the beach behind the North Pier — only narrowly escaping with their own lives.

Following the life-boat's failure, the crowd became even more anxious that the *Newcastle*'s passengers and crew should be saved before nightfall. This general opinion was communicated to the Lord Provost, who was present. On the spot, he convened a hasty meeting of the Harbour Commissioners present, the Captain Pilot and a number of seafarers. After a general discussion, they decided to ask Captain Robinson, owner of the steam tugs, if one of his tugs would try to reach the vessel. At four p.m., at almost full tide, the tug *Samson* steamed over the bar under Captain Robinson's direction. On board was a total of sixteen men, nine of them captains of ships tied up in Aberdeen harbour. Watched by the crowd, the *Samson* steered down channel, survived the boiling broth of green sea at the harbour mouth and made off for the *Newcastle* . All the way out, the *Samson* ran the risk of having her slim funnel washed away and her fires doused.

When they reached the *Newcastle*'s leeward side, the *Samson*'s crew lowered a boat, which made two trips to transfer the passengers and crew from the stricken ship to the steam tug. The *Samson*, rescuers and rescued then rode safely back to Waterloo Quay. Next day, the *Newcastle* was still afloat and the *Samson* went out to take her in tow as salvage. This notion was abandoned, however, and the vessel left to her fate. After surviving the tempest for fifty hours, the clipper went down by the head in fifty fathoms of water. She was later washed ashore near Cove. (38)

Whereas the *Newcastle* had survived a storm for fifty hours, the German bone-carrier *Frau Arnkalina* went to pieces in less than ten minutes when she struck the point of the North Pier later that same year. Fortunately the usual crowd of spectators on the pier threw ropes to the three crew members and hauled them up the pier's sloping point. (39) Three minutes later, the frail barque had been pounded to bits. The life-boat could never have been launched quickly enough to save the crew, assuming it could have got near enough to them.

In the mid-40's a life-line between ship and shore was also used to save the crew of the Prussian vessel *Aurora* , ashore at the Black Dog three miles north of the River Don. The Manby apparatus was hauled from the Don Preventive Station and fired off three times without success. The *Aurora*'s crew reverted to earlier methods and floated a cask ashore with a line attached. A rope was then strung up, a coble fixed to it and the crew all landed safely. (40)

In the mid-40's, also, lifebuoys with ropes attached were placed on the North Pier as an extra precaution. These were used to save the mate and the rest of the crew of the collier *Margarets* , Stockton, when she lost her steering entering the harbour and stuck fast on the rocks behind the North Pier. (41)

For six years during the mid-1840's the life-boat had been eclipsed as a rescue instrument by these other methods. When she was used again in a major rescue, the performance was abysmal. Late on a Sunday afternoon in October 1848, the steamer *Velocity* , belonging to the 'Aberdeen, Leith and Clyde' company reached Aberdeen bay from Newcastle. Forced to wait off for one and a half hours because of low tide, Captain Andrews headed the *Velocity* for Aberdeen harbour some time after six p.m. With a good deal of sea running and a heavy flow of fresh water from the Dee, there was a strong cross-current at the pierheads. Struck by two heavy seas, the *Velocity* was pushed by the crosscurrent onto the North Pier, at the same point as the *Brilliant* nine years previously. As soon as she struck, the pilots were called to get out the life-boat, 'but unfortunately some time was spent in searching for the key of the boathouse.' (42) A local bookseller and one

or two others broke open the door with crowbars and the lifeboat was soon launched. Much valuable time was then lost in sorting out a crew of volunteers, as the pilots once more refused to go out in the boat. With the life-boat still some distance up the channel, the *Velocity* broke in two and the poop deck floated away from the pier with the captain, six crewmen and eight passengers still on it. Less than half an hour later not a trace of the vessel was to be seen, but not before the fishermen who manned the life-boat had saved those stranded on the poop. The reporter in the 'Aberdeen Journal' complained that too much time was being lost in getting the life-boat out to a shipwreck. He found two major faults with the service: the want of a harbour official resident near the pier and responsible for getting out the life-boat; and the tightfistedness of the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners. When he asked the pilots why they so often refused to take the life-boat to sea in an emergency, he was told they were 'seldom recompensed for such services'. (42) He suggested to the Commissioners that the pilots, and any others who manned the boat, should be paid a fixed sum for their help.

Just two months before the *Velocity* went up on the North Pier and broke up, the Pilotage Committee of the Harbour Commissioners had been instructed to find out how a life-boat crew could be established. (43) That committee spent a year and a quarter — from October 1848 to December 1849 — in deciding how to carry out this relatively straightforward task. In the meantime, in January 1849, most of the pilots again refused to man the life-boat when she was got out to save the crew of the Dundee schooner *Isabella* — ashore on the beach just north of the Fisher's Squares at Fittie. (44)The substance of the committee's eventual report was that a life-boat crew be selected by the Captain Pilot from among the licensed pilots at the harbour; that each of the crew be paid an annual retainer of one guinea from harbour funds; that a small, extra donation be given the crew each time they saved lives; and that the crew should acquire some skill in handling the boat by taking it out on practice several times a year. (45) These were the Pilotage Committee's recommendations to the Harbour Commissioners. However, when the pilots' skill in boat-handling was next needed — in November 1852 — the Fittie men again refused to man the life-boat. That day, eleven Aberdeen men's lives were lost when the *Venus* and the *Armitstead* came ashore in plain view of thousands of spectators on Aberdeen beach.

By the early morning of Friday 26th November 1852, a 'violent hurricane' had blown up, with the sea 'lashed to a tempestuous state'. The Aberdeen brig *Venus*, carrying coal from Newcastle, missed the tide and was prevented from entering the harbour. But the irresistable

wind from the south-east made it impossible for Captain Matthew to keep his 134-ton vessel at sea. He deliberately ran her ashore on the beach, opposite the Broad Hill, at five o'clock in the morning. The tide was full out at this time and the vessel grounded five hundred yards from the shore, with the sea breaking right over her. The shipwreck was spotted. The men at the shipbuilding yards turned out to launch the life-boat. Not enough rope could be found to haul the boat to the launching point. After some delay, a whaler's ropes were used. As the life-boat was laboriously hauled to the surf's edge, Robert Hunter, a Fittie man, 'was despatched to engage a crew of pilots to man her, with authority to give a promise from those taking charge, that they would be paid for their work'. As the boat reached the beach, Hunter returned with the information that only two men would help. The rest of the Fittie pilots and fishermen were united in refusing their assistance: 'the reason they gave being that their annual fee for manning the life-boat had been taken from them.' (46) There was no shortage of volunteers to take their place.

Over the next four hours the life-boat was launched eight times. It would be taken a quarter of a mile to windward of the wreck and then pushed off. Seven times the gale was too strong for the oarsmen and the life-boat was pushed to leeward of the *Venus* before she could get far enough offshore to reach her. With no hope of pulling against the wind, back towards the *Venus*, the life-boat volunteers rowed to shore. The boat was then again hauled a quarter of a mile to windward and the whole strenuous, frustrating failure repeated with another, fresh crew of volunteer carpenters, harbour workers, captains, mates and seamen. About ten o'clock, the coastguardsmen fired off their rocket apparatus, in an attempt to reach the shipwreck with a line. Seven men were to be seen clinging to the rigging, but the masts were clearly about to give way. The first rocket was caught by the wind, turned in the air and landed inland from the beach. The second failed to reach the wreck. The third snapped the line attached and still failed to reach the *Venus*. The wind was too strong for the under-charged rockets. By the time the life-boat made its eighth attempt to reach the *Venus*, the wreck's masts were gone, she had almost entirely broken up and only two men were still clinging to her. Around noon, with the wind moderating and coming round off the land, the life-boat made the wreck and managed to rescue one survivor.

While the life-boat was still trying to reach the *Venus*, the brig *Armitstead* appeared around the Girdleness at eleven-fifteen a.m. She had six feet of water in her hold and was unmanageable in the heavy swell. She was run ashore mid-way between Fittie and the Bathing Station. With the life-boat still working at the *Venus*, it was

almost an hour before a ship's life-boat was dragged from the harbour, manned by carpenters and dock-gate men and rowed out to the *Armitstead*. The pilots again refused to undertake any rescue work. Before the got-together crew and their makeshift rescue craft could reach the *Armitstead* she had broken in two — an Aberdeen-owned coffin ship. Five of her crew were washed away and only Captain Andrews was left clinging to a floating plank. This was his second shipwreck in four years. He had been on the poop of the *Velocity* in 1848. The captain's only support was washed shorewards by successive waves. A dozen men linked arms, waded into the sea and grabbed hold of him. He was one of only two survivors that Friday. Eleven Aberdeen men had drowned, leaving eight widows and fifteen orphaned children.

The rescue missions to the *Venus* and *Armitstead* revealed a number of defects in the Aberdeen life-boat service. In 1849, the Harbour Commissioners had accepted the need for a regular life-boat crew. The crew had indeed been chosen from among the licensed pilots, who 'were not found as efficient as might have been anticipated. There was also great difficulty in keeping up the crew, and the Captain Pilot, who had the charge of the boat, thought he was fully as safe to trust to experienced persons, either seamen or pilots, volunteering their services, when occasion required.' (47) Misguided by their own employee, the Harbour Commissioners had withdrawn the new, regular crew's annual retainer and dispensed with its services. When asked to help on 26th November 1852, and even offered money if they would do so, the Fittie pilots and fishermen almost to a man refused.

The presence of the Fittie men, wily in the ways of the sea off Aberdeen, might have made all the difference in reaching the *Venus* earlier; while more sailors still hung on for life. Their help might have seen a faster rescue mounted for the crew of the disintegrating *Armitstead*. The long reluctance of the Harbour Commissioners to accept the R.N.L.I. principles of a paid, regular, well-trained crew had created a good deal of suspicion and want of cooperation between the pilots and the harbour authorities. This aggravated the long-standing antipathy between Fittie folk and 'toonsers'. Once they introduced the idea of a regular crew and an annual fee, the Harbour Commissioners were probably ill-advised by the Captain Pilot to renege on their commitment. When the authorities did renege, Fittie antipathy became obdurate non-cooperation. It is open to debate whether the presence of the skilled, Fittie boat-handlers would have saved more shipwrecked seamen that Friday. The force of the wind had certainly revealed an important disadvantage of the boat itself. The life-boat was too big for working off Aberdeen beach. She had too deep a draught for working in the shallow waters off Aberdeen's gently slop-

ing beach. Her high sides also caught the south-easterly wind, which tended to blow her northwards before her crew could pull off as far as the wreck.

With their life-boat defective and their crewing arrangements inadequate, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners held a special meeting less than a week after the twin tragedies on the beach. The Commissioners, be it noted, comprised nineteen town councillors and twelve elected representatives of the harbour community. The Shoremaster, Mr Gibb, recommended that a committee be set up to examine the best means of establishing a practical, efficient life-boat service at Aberdeen. The committee should seek advice from shipowners and other locals with a practical knowledge of the sea. As an interim measure, he advised them to re-appoint a regular life-boat crew and arrange financial terms which would ensure the men's presence at an emergency. The Provost supported the Shoremaster's recommendations and a committee was appointed to meet the very next day. Before their meeting broke up, the Commissioners also dealt with their annual licensing of the harbour pilots. Mr Henderson, a local architect and builder, wanted no licence to be granted a pilot unless he first bound himself to man the life-boat. The Shoremaster backed Mr Henderson's proposal. The Commissioners then approved the renewal of the licences, on the understanding that they could withdraw them without giving a reason if the pilots 'did not do their duty on all occasions'. (48) Men who sat at desks, and were never called on to go to sea in a gale, threatened to rob others of their livelihood if they did not risk their lives; and do so for no reward, moreover. It is doubtful if these threats, published in the 'Aberdeen Journal', upset the Fittie men. Few enough of them could read.

In the week following the *Venus-Armitstead* tragedy, during which a meeting was convened in the Town Hall to consider new life-boat arrangements, there was growing public unease in Aberdeen about the efficiency of the rescue facilities. In an atmosphere of distrust, the Harbour Commissioners sought the advice of shipowners, shipmasters and others connected with the harbour. (49) The general drift at the meeting was to avoid investigating the circumstances surrounding the recent wrecks. To uncover the past was to ask embarrassing questions about the recent performance of the life-saving service and about the break-up of the *Armitstead* so quickly after she grounded. The mutual recrimination which would accompany such questions carried with it the danger of revealing too much past incompetence and even downright dishonesty. One shipowner recommended the harbour authorities seek government aid in running a life-boat service. (50) Mr N. Smith, another shipowner, and also a wholesale merchant, wanted a comm-

ittee set up. It would make suggestions on how to establish a well-managed, fully-equipped life-boat service, properly-manned and well-regulated. (50) This shipowner's recommendations were applauded. Captain Longmuir, one of a family of local shipmasters and a ready helper at rescues, 'conceived..... the root of the evil..... to lie in the inefficient condition of many vessels which leave this and other ports. Were vessels of sufficient strength and fully equipped, they would be able, instead of being forced to run into the nearest port, to keep out at sea till a gale was over. ..... Ships in the navy were broken up when unfit for sea, and why should unseaworthy vessels be allowed to continue to risk men's lives? If every vessel were certified before going to sea, it would go far to remedy the evil'. (50) Captain Longmuir's remedy for maritime disasters — with prevention to be emphasised as much as cure — was a painful one for those Aberdeen shipowners who made profits from sending sailors out in unseaworthy, coffin ships. The captain's remarks were ignored. With the shipowners' support, the Harbour Commissioners set up a committee of shipbuilders, shipowners and shipmasters to act on Mr Smith's recommendations.

Committees, and how the harbour authorities loved to set them up, are slow thinkers and movers. Four months later, on 1st April 1853, no concrete improvement had been made on re-equipping and revitalising Aberdeen's lifesaving facilities. That April Fool's Day, the Harbour Commissioners' inefficiency was underlined by yet another tragedy at sea. As genteel Aberdonians sat down to tea that Friday evening in 1853, the iron steamer *Duke of Sutherland* was totally wrecked at the harbour mouth, within twenty yards of the pier-head. (51) Under Captain Howling, the Aberdeen Steam Navigation Company's vessel had been anchored for two hours in the bay until there was enough water on the bar for her to enter harbour. The sea between the pier-heads was at its trickiest. A fierce, variable, south to south-south-easterly wind, a heavy sea on the bar and a strong flow of fresh from the river — this combination brought heavy waves rolling inwards, together with a cross-current between the points of the old South Breakwater and the North Pier. As the *Duke* entered harbour, Captain Howling lost control when she was struck on the quarter by two or three heavy seas. Completely covered by one huge wave, the steamer was thrown onto the rocks at the pier end — her boilers extinguished, her bottom torn open.

Just half an hour after the vessel struck, the life-boat had been launched and had reached the wreck. On this speedy mission the life-boat's twelve crew members were all of them pilots — with Fittie names like Morrice, Main, Allan and Kay (Caie?). Half way down channel, the life-boat's crew picked up one man from the water.

The wreck of the steamer 'Duke of Sutherland' at the North Pier on 1 April 1853
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

Almost immediately their boat reached the steamer, a large barrel that was floating wildly about struck the life-boat's upper works violently. She was badly damaged and quickly flooded with water. Water-logged, the life-boat was put alongside the *Duke*'s starboard quarter, took off fifteen people and then made successfully for the beach. Those passengers and crew left aboard the steamer clustered around her starboard paddle-box. To help get them off, the Harbour Master and some assistants fetched the Dennett's rockets and the life-lines from the Round House. There was some delay before these were carried down the pier. No less than twenty unsuccessful attempts were made to fire a rocket and life-line over the mid-ships section of the *Duke of Sutherland*. The failure was partly caused by the heavy rain and the surf breaking over the pier. They tended to dampen the powder. The major fault, however, was the firing crew's lack of any proper training in loading and firing the rocket apparatus. They were allowing the powder to escape from the firing chamber before they even pulled the trigger. When Captain Morrison the Harbour Master, Dr Neil Sutherland of the Aberdeenshire Militia and an anonymous mechanic took charge of the apparatus, they managed to fire it off properly at the twenty-first try. The rocket and line sailed over the *Duke*, a hawser was pulled across from the pier, fastened to the ship and quickly tightened up ready for the cradle to be attached to it. There was no cradle. One was improvised from a box floating in the water. Ropes, instead of smoother-running rings, were hitched across

the tightened hawser. On its first trial the box cradle proved unsafe. It was replaced by slings and several passengers pulled safely across to the pier.

The life-boat was out of action; the rescue efforts on the pier were slow and fumbling; several men and women on the *Duke* had already drowned; the ship began to break up, with the section aft of the funnel washed away. Impatient, brave and perhaps reckless, six seamen launched a salmon coble, pulled through the breakers to the wreck, picked up two or three survivors and headed back for the shore. Caught by heavy seas, the coble capsized and five of her crew were drowned. The rescuers on the pier were now racing against their fear that the ship would break up completely before the rest of the passengers and crew could be got off. The female passengers and the chief steward, Duncan F. Christie, proved themselves the heroes of this effort. After Captain Howling was washed away and drowned, Christie took charge of getting six or seven women and fourteen men back across the hawser on the slings. The women helped eleven of the men into the slings and tied them in, before they agreed to go ashore themselves. Three people were pulled across at a time. The chief steward and two other men were the last to be taken off. Twenty or so people were rescued by the apparatus at the pier. The 'Aberdeen Journal' insisted that many were saved only because of Christie's clear-headedness, powers of command and personal courage. (52)

Local shipbuilders, doctors, ship's captains, carpenters, naval officers and ratings — all had played a part in rescuing forty four souls from the *Duke*. Despite their exertions, sixteen lives were lost — eleven from the steamer and five in the coble. Of the sixteen, four were women and twelve were men. In his report of the wreck, the 'Aberdeen Journal''s reporter scathingly criticised the rescue service. He accepted that the life-boat crew had performed their duties promptly and ably, until their boat was put out of action. He was certain more lives would have been saved, but for 'the want of that order and promptitude, and efficiency of apparatus, so essential to successful exertion on such an emergency.' (53) Among the crowds of friends, relatives and spectators gathered on the beach to watch the rescue attempts, 'bitter were the complaints as to the want of proper preparations for such a catastrophe'. (53) A public meeting was held in the Union Hall and it was generally agreed that the blame for the recent loss of life lay with the harbour authorities. A petition was got up and circulated in the city for signatures. It called on the Harbour Commissioners to have proper apparatus and paid, regularly-trained men to operate it. (54) In parliament, the Lord Advocate set up a full enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the wreck of the *Duke* and the means avail-

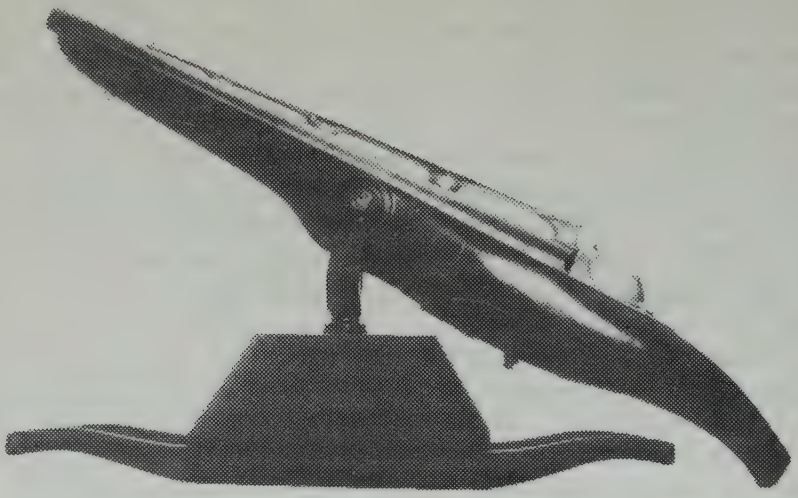
able for saving those aboard her. (55) At an emotional funeral watched by hundreds of people, five of the victims were buried in St Clement's churchyard. Mass funerals for those lost at sea are always an occasion for speculating on the cause of the disaster and apportioning blame to those deemed responsible. With the furies of press, public and parliamentary censure gathering over their heads, the Harbour Commissioners rushed out the report of the committee set up the previous December to instigate a better life-saving service.

That committee had apparently set up a sub-committee which had first instructed Walter Hood and Company, local shipbuilders, to recondition the life-boat. When this was done — well before the disaster to the *Duke* — a double set of oars, life-lines, boat-hooks, grapnels, anchors and other implements were placed in the boat ready for use. A regular life-boat crew of licensed pilots was appointed, 'immediately put on pay' and sent out in the boat in stormy weather to practice. The Dennett's rockets were examined and an ample supply of rockets and lines ensured. (56) This was the state of the life-preserving apparatus when the *Duke of Sutherland* struck off the North Pier. The sub-committee's report also indicated that a new life-boat had been ordered from Messrs. Forrest & Son, the Norway Yard, Limehouse, London — the official life-boat builders of the R.N.L.I. The boat was constructed according to the design of Mr James Peake, one of the most renowned life-boat builders in the mid-19th century. Two well-constructed, easily-managed carriages were also on order. More Dennett's rockets and a set of Manby apparatus were to be purchased and placed near the harbour entrance. Proper training and supervision in the use of these life-lines was to be introduced.

After the loss of the *Duke*, when the Harbour Commissioners discussed the sub-committee's initiatives and recommendations on 12th April, a series of accusations and counter-accusations about their slowness in acquiring a new life-boat took up the commissioners' attention. From the lengthy report of these mutual recriminations it is clear that the sub-committee had met about six times. (57) It had performed some of its duties ably enough, while others had been overlooked. It could not be faulted for not procuring another life-boat in the four months between the *Venus-Armitstead* tragedy and the wreck of the *Duke*. Boatbuilders' designs had to be studied and a life-boat model chosen which was safe, efficient and suited to the conditions off Aberdeen beach. The boat itself had then to be built. All of which took time. On the other hand, the sub-committee had discussed but not seen to the proper training of a team to operate the Dennett's rockets and life-lines. This oversight, more than any other, was responsible for the loss of extra lives at the *Duke of Sutherland*

disaster. Perhaps part of the explanation for this tragic deficiency lies in pressure of work for the Master of Shoreworks, who was also convener of the sub-committee. Mr Alexander Gibb had only been Master of Shoreworks for four months. During that time he had not only to supervise three major projects for the Harbour Trust but also to see to his own private business. Though he had certainly worked hard, Mr Gibb had been unable to attend to every aspect of life-saving at the port. Rejecting a suggestion that Mr Gibb was at fault, the Commissioners' 12th April meeting resolved to continue quickly with the sub-committee's work on bringing the life-saving service up to standard.

During the next six months, the most intense, concerted activity of the Harbour Commissioners, the carpenters at the Fittie shipyards and the local seamen produced a life-saving service which was the best equipped in Scotland if not all Britain. The new life-boat arrived some time in August. It was a self-righter — Aberdeen's first — and was named the *Bon Accord*. The old life-boat was once more repaired in Walter Hood's shipyard, though it never seems to have been much used again. Two new life-boat houses were built — one near the Broad Hill and the other near the North Pier, with the new boat in the house near the pier. (58) Aberdeen's new life-boathouse was built on the harbour side of Pilot's Square, only a few yards from the outward-facing walls of the houses. The old life-boat shed was converted to a storehouse. Captain Manby gifted a small-bore mortar and its gear. (59) The Commissioners bought more sets of Manby apparatus, Dennett's rockets and Cartes' rockets. A powerful harpoon gun was looked out and adapted for firing life-lines to distressed vessels. All these life-preserving aids were placed in the new life-boat houses and in another new building on the Torry side of the channel. The Captain Pilot, a newly-appointed Assistant Captain Pilot and the Keeper of the Leading Lights at Torry were made responsible for the upkeep, regular exercise and emergency employment of the equipment. The Commissioners drew up a lengthy set of regulations governing the life-boat and life-preserving apparatus. Copies of these were printed and distributed among all those harbour officials and life-boatmen obliged to turn out in an emergency. (60) The appointment of a regular life-boat crew, with a master, mate and ten oarsmen, was confirmed. The master was on an annual retainer of £5, the mate £4 and the crew £3 each. Supervised by the authorities, regular practices were introduced, in which the life-boat crew exercised their boat-handling skills in stormy weather and life-lines were fired across the mouths of the Dee and the Don by the mortar and rocket teams. (61) These practice exercises became a regular spectacle at the harbour and were kept up.



Whaling harpoon converted at Aberdeen in 1853 for firing life-lines.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

The carpenters, shipbuilders and seamen of the harbour community also helped to improve the life-saving facilities. The shipwrights, with £30 raised by public subscription and the support of Aberdeen's Comptroller of Customs, bought their own mortar and its accompanying life-lines. With a 5½ inch bore, this large, new mortar was reckoned capable of firing a line a distance of 120 fathoms (720 feet) out to sea. (62) Manned by a squad of carpenters, it became a part of the Harbour Commissioners' armoury. Aberdeen's seamen acquired a life-boat of their own, which they manned themselves. When asked, the Harbour Commissioners refused any responsibility for managing the seamen's boat. (63) James and William Hall, the Duthie brothers and Walter Hood — the builders of Aberdeen's famous clipper ships — were always on the shore in an emergency. With their men and their horses they had helped launch the life-boat; they had pulled drowning men ashore; they had always been ready with advice on the life-boat's design and efficient operation. The public-spirited Halls now suggested that the life-boat could be launched more safely if an anchor, pulley and chain arrangement was dug in below the low water mark and used for hauling out the boat. The shipbuilders' proposal was accepted and put into effect. (64) Some Aberdeen citizens asked a Mr Boyd to visit the city and deliver a lecture 'on the means of preserving life in shipwreck and from drowning'. (65) The combination of official policy and community action gave Aberdeen no less than three life-boats and their gear, three or four sets of Manby apparatus, as

many sets of rockets and a rescue harpoon — all properly regulated and with crews regularly trained in their use. The measure of Aberdeen's achievement is that, in the whole of Scotland in 1858, there were only four or five serviceable life-boats. (66) This proficient local service was bought dearly, with human lives. It remained to be seen if Aberdeen maintained its new, high standards.

CHAPTER 3
FROM SUCCESS TO DISASTER AGAIN, 1854-1874

Showers of sleet, drifting snow, high winds and severe storms filled the first two weeks of January 1854. The shipping casualties caused by this weather put the renewed Aberdeen life-saving service to its first test. At 6pm on Saturday 7th January the Swedish schooner *Johan Augusta*, carrying bones to Aberdeen, was driven ashore on the beach in a south-easterly gale. The Harbour Commissioners' new life-boat was got out and manned by her regular crew, who had to pull very hard to get the boat clear of the surf inshore. On her first attempt, the life-boat failed to reach the *Johan Augusta*, which was grounded on the beach a quarter of a mile north of the harbour entrance. When the life-boatmen tried again and reached her, only one of the schooner's crew would leave. The life-boat put out a third time and the pilots persuaded another three of the Swedes to come ashore. Altogether, the life-boat was out in the darkness for three hours. The seamen's life-boat also went out on this mission. It was launched into the harbour then headed out to the stricken schooner. Unfortunately, it was 'thrown round by the breakers and after considerable peril landed on the beach north of the harbour'. (67) After this incident the seamen's life-boat was little used. The sailors were a floating population and their boat could neither be properly managed nor provided with a regular crew. The new efficiency of the Harbour Commissioners' boat made the seamen's initiative superfluous, except in unusual circumstances where several ships came ashore at once. Until 1867, the seamen's life-boat lay in its house on the Old Town Links, 'under the charge of everybody and attended to by nobody'. (68) That year the seamen handed their boat over to the Sailor's Missions, to use as it wished.

The Monday following the *Johan Augusta* rescue, another schooner, the *Carl*, carrying salt from Lisbon to Gothenburg, was seen flying distress flags off the Girdleness. The pilots signalled her master to run his ship onto the sands north of the harbour, if he failed to make the entrance. The sleet and spray had woefully reduced visibility. The vessel had lost her rudder. Ignorant of the signals, Captain Petersson got his ship ashore on the rocks to the east of the old South Breakwater. The life-preserving apparatus was taken out of its newly-built housing at Torry and run to the south pier. A line was fired off to the stranded vessel, but missed her because of the strong wind. The second rocket was on target, the line passed over the schooner and contact between the ship and shore was established. Once the hawser and cradle were set up, the rocket firing team needed only half an hour

to pull the captain's wife and all eight of a crew to safety. The carpenters had also got out their mortar and carried it to the south pier. When they saw it was not needed, they gave the rocket crew a hand to work the lines between the wreck and the pier. (69) As usual, the harbour fraternity helped out with life-saving work. As well as the carpenters' assistance, Captain Morrison of the local schooner *Harbottle Castle* went out on the cradle at its first passage and was the last to leave the *Carl*.

The Harbour Commissioners' new, fully-equipped life-saving service seemed vindicated by these two rescues. Four crewmen out of six had been taken off the *Johan Augusta*. The master and the cook came ashore safely when the tide receded. Eight men and a woman had been taken ashore from the *Carl*. No lives were lost. The life-boat and the rocket apparatus had both been tested. The 'Aberdeen Journal' and the Lord Provost were justifiably extravagant in their use of the words 'efficiency' and 'promptitude' in connection with the service. The Harbour Commissioners were carried along on a flood tide of self-congratulation. Their relief that the harbour had missed a third successive disaster found its outlet in fulsome praise of Mr Gibb, the Shoremaster, whose new equipment and new regulations seemed to be so triumphantly justified.

Exactly three years later, in January 1857, the life-boat was called out to two rescues in a single week-end. On the Saturday afternoon the *Bon-Accord* was launched to save the crew of a Torry fishing boat which had been caught in the Bay of Nigg in a gale. The life-boatmen took aboard the six fishermen and towed their fishing-boat to the beach. Had the life-boat not gone out, the six Torry men would probably have perished, so harsh was the east-south-easterly gale. In the snow showers of that same gale, the 90-ton collier *Industry*, from Beauly, tried to make Aberdeen harbour on Sunday morning. She could not ride out the storm but she could not make the harbour either. She came ashore three-quarters of a mile north of the harbour entrance and her crew of seven had not long to wait aboard ship before the life-boat took them off. (70) Later that same year, the German brig *Heinrich* went ashore near Cove in the thick fog which so often blots out the Kincardineshire coast. The steam tug *Elswick* went round, pulled her off and got her in tow. As she was being pulled into the Aberdeen harbour channel, the leaky brig settled down between the pierheads. Her crew were safely landed on the Sunday evening. (71) The steam tugs and the life-boat were both involved with the next shipping casualty, in December 1858. The tugs *Heather Bell* and *Victory* were towing in the Aberdeen brig *Lion* in a stiff, southerly breeze when the tow rope broke. The brig's anchors were thrown out

and the tugs tried to regain their tow. But the *Lion* drifted away from them and came ashore near the mouth of the Don. The life-boat was promptly launched from near the pier and landed all ten of the brig's crew. (72) The list of the life-boatmen who took part in this rescue reads like a roll-call of the surnames in the Fittie squares: William Baxter, William Smith, Alexander Fowler, Pearson Morrice, Alexander Baxter, Andrew Walker, John Guyan, James Morrice, Alexander Paterson, Alexander Watson, Alexander Baxter, Andrew Smith and Alexander Noble.

A week into the new year of 1859, the Wick steamer *Earl of Caithness* tried to enter Aberdeen harbour, even though the tide had been ebbing for four and a half hours. Steered too close to the South Breakwater, the steamer struck the bottom once or twice and then fixed. In the high sea that was running, the *Earl*'s position was a dangerous one. On the North Pier, the Captain Pilot fired off a mortar — a new signal which was occasionally used to call out the life-boat crew. In five or six trips between ship and shore, the life-boat took off all those on board the *Earl of Caithness*. There were no casualties among the forty-five people aboard the steamer. (73) A month later, when the leaky brig *St Nicholas* was beached opposite the Broad Hill, it was the Fittie fishermen and their wives who rescued the crew from their refuge in the rigging. (74) The life-boat was called out to the next shipwreck, on 8th October 1859, though she played no part in getting the thrity passengers and crew ashore. The *Duke of Richmond*, one of the Aberdeen, Leith and Clyde's steamers, had gone aground in dense fog about one mile north of the River Don. The steamer's crew launched their own life-boat and quarter-boats and soon realised that they could even wade ashore. Lines were rigged up to the shore and the passengers waded onto the beach. Meanwhile the company manager, Mr Milne, had heard of the accident. He got two tugs and the life-boat to push north and render assistance. This was the first instance of the Aberdeen life-boat being towed to a rescue by a steam tug. Their services were not needed for rescue work, but the tugs did start trying to tow off the *Duke of Richmond* at eight a.m. About a hundred of Hall's carpenters, who had travelled overland to assist in any life-saving, helped take sheep and deck cargo off the steamer to lighten her. Despite the tugs' and the carpenters' efforts, the steamer stuck fast; well and truly grounded. (75)

The next casualty at Aberdeen harbour was, like the *Earl of Caithness*, a Wick vessel. The *Chance* had neither the size nor the glamour of the steamer, however. She was only thirty five registered tons and was carrying guano fertiliser. When she went ashore in late January 1860 on the south side of the channel, after trying to enter harbour in

impossible conditions, her crew of two were rescued by lines thrown to them from the shore. (76) The Aberdeen brig *Eagle*, carrying coal from Newcastle to Aberdeen, was being brought expertly into harbour in the face of a gale early on a Saturday morning, 11th December 1861. She was coming in well, when the sea caught her on the starboard quarter and the fresh caught her on the port bow. Captain Mathieson lost control of his command for a vital minute and she struck on the North Pier, where she lay broadside to the point. With his fully-laden ship grounded on rocks in a heavy swell, the captain realised that the wreck would not survive intact for very long. He shouted to his five crewmen to save their lives as best they could. Mathieson then jumped into the sea and struggled onto the rocks. He grabbed an iron bar anchored in the pier but was washed away. Washed back by the swell, this time he grabbed the rung of an iron ladder and managed to climb up the side of the pier. A crewman, John Mearns, escaped in much the same way. The *Eagle*'s mate was washed round the back of the pier and twice torn away from some iron bars he had a hold of. The third time, he thrust his hand between two of the stones in the wall, keeping his fist clenched, and managed to hold on until he was rescued. A lifebuoy was thrown to him by some of the pilots, who by this time had got down to the spot. (77) The mate, Alexander Anderson, must have been agonised as the sea tried to pull him out and his clenched hand took all the strain. With another man still crying from the water, the life-boat was launched and pulled out a good distance north of the pier. Charles Falconer was taken from the sea, after clinging to a piece of wreckage for almost half an hour. Within twenty minutes of the *Eagle* striking, she was ground to splinters. Her other two crewmen were never seen again.

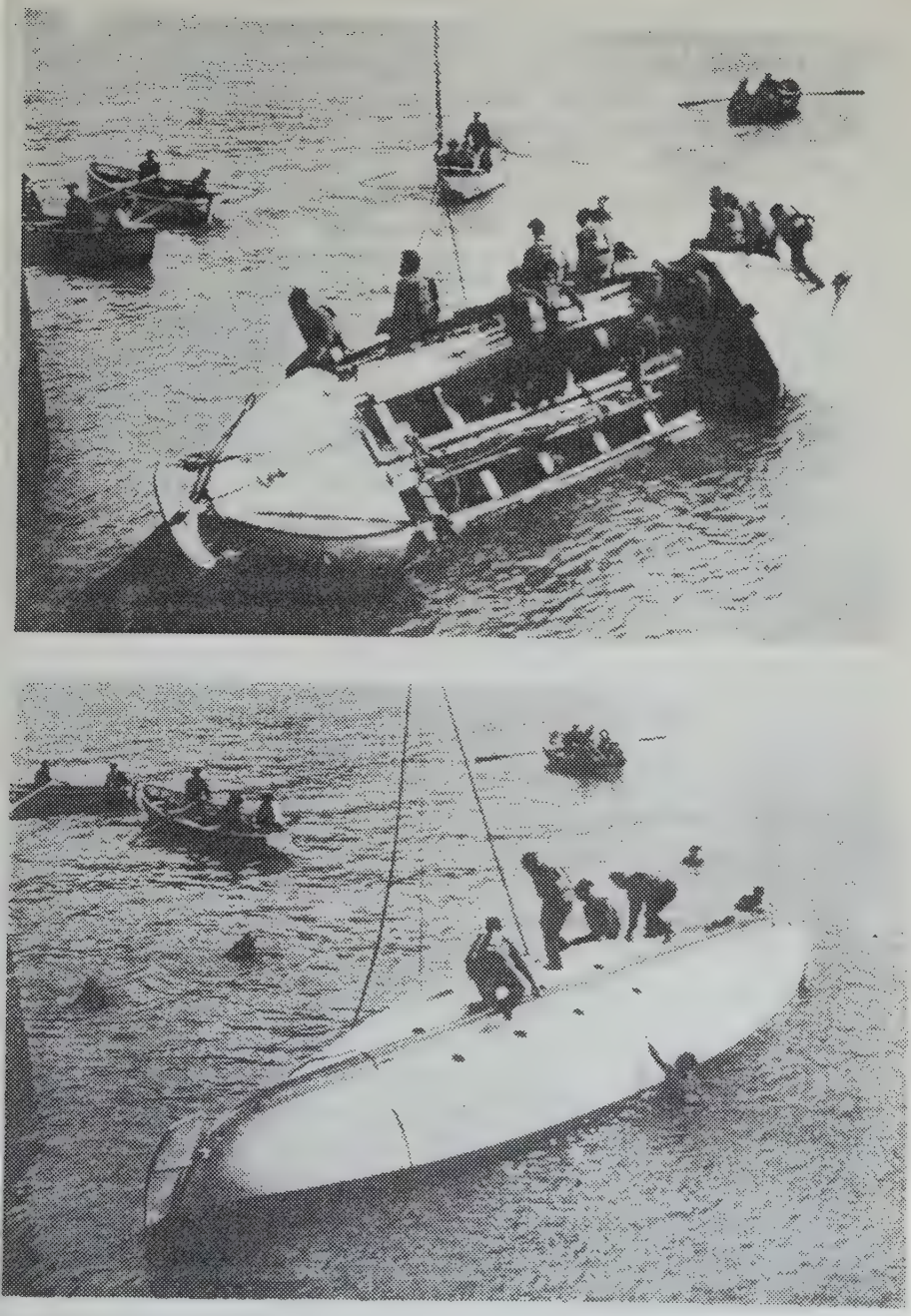
In March 1863 the brig *Phoenix*, the steamer *Prince Consort* and an unnamed St Combs fishing boat all went aground near the harbour mouth. The crew of the *Phoenix* were landed safely by the life-boat. The sixty passengers and crew of the *Prince Consort*, aground only eight to nine yards from the south side of the north pier, were got off by the unflappable crews of the life-boat and the life-preserving apparatus. A pilot boat saved the six St Combs fishermen, who had been returning home from Montrose with mussels to bait their lines. (78) For these and earlier rescue missions the 'Aberdeen Journal' testified to the promptness and efficiency of life-boat operations. It seems to have taken the crew between twenty minutes and half an hour to assemble, man and launch the boat. Despite this reputation for efficiency, there was some slackness on the part of the harbour's watchmen when the next casualty occurred. The local coal-carrying schooner *Jane Smith*, belonging to an Aberdeen spirit-dealer, had sprung a leak

early on Tuesday 6th March 1866. With four feet of water in her hold, she arrived off Aberdeen at six a.m., flying a distress signal. No notice was taken of her and no assistance was forthcoming. At eight o'clock, Captain Hamilton could hold his leaking ship at sea no longer. He decided to save his crew's lives and tried to take the bar at low water. The strong current from the river threw the *Jane Smith* outside the pier, where she was caught by the violent southerly wind and driven ashore. The Captain Pilot, Captain Gauld, now arrived on the spot and got out the life-boat in time to save the collier's crew of four. (79)

Much closer attention was given to the next vessel caught in a major storm off Aberdeen, in January 1868. In the worst weather in seven years, the *Jane*, of Jersey, was dismasted by hurricane-force winds and had to try for the entrance to the harbour. When this attempt failed, her crew dropped anchor opposite the Bathing Station. Immediately the anchors began to drag, the life-boat was launched to take off the crew. It was as well the life-boat was called out so promptly. The *Jane* sank at four o'clock in the afternoon, before she was abreast of the Donmouth. Before she sank, the life-boat had made three attempts to reach her — two of them abortive. The first try failed when the grappling irons thrown by the life-boatmen failed to hold and the life-boat could not stay alongside. At the third throw the grapplings held, the life-boat came under the *Jane*'s quarter, the crew of ten transferred and the life-boatmen rowed back to the beach. Only four months later, in mid-April 1868, the schooner *Carl Andreas* was run well up on the beach when the Captain Pilot, realising she would go onto the north pier, signalled her to stand off to the north side. Her captain and crew, five men in all, were taken off by the life-boat in seas that were relatively calm. (80)

By 1873, when the *Bon-Accord* had been twenty years at Aberdeen, she had gone out on almost two dozen rescue missions. On some of these she played no part in rescuing survivors; their own efforts may already have got them ashore. In others, her crew shared the credit with the crews of the life-line apparatus housed at the North Pier and Torry. Only two lives had been lost in all this endeavour, at the wreck of the *Eagle*, and that was not the life-boat crew's fault. Just as the Harbour Commissioners might have been congratulating themselves on twenty years of success, disaster struck at Aberdeen harbour mouth and a Board of Trade inquiry was held into the conduct of the Aberdeen life-saving service.

The tragedy of lost lives, misunderstanding and recrimination began off Stonehaven on Friday afternoon, 27th February 1874. Just before two p.m. the chairman of the R.N.L.I. committee at Stonehaven was told that a barque was sailing northwards two miles off Dunnottar

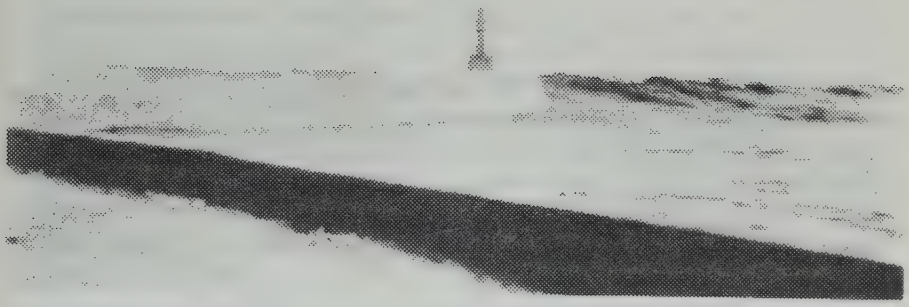


Self-righting trials with a ten-oared, oar and sail life-boat.
(photos courtesy of Donald Smith')

Castle and was flying signals of distress. She was making a fair speed of four to five knots. The crew of the Stonehaven life-boat, *St George*, quickly appeared when the red flag was hoisted at the boathouse. When the *St George* left harbour at a quarter past two, the committee chairman sent a telegram to the Dockmaster at Aberdeen, advising him that the life-boat had set off north after the barque. This telegram reached the Aberdeen Dock-office at 5.20 but was not given to the Dock-master until 8.20pm. About three o'clock, three-quarters of an hour after the *St George* went out, the feuar at Stonehaven went to the telegraph office. He had the following message sent to Mr Inglis, Aberdeen agent for the Shipwrecked Mariners' Society: 'Ship passed Stonehaven in distress. Life-boat in pursuit. Look out'. (81) Mr Inglis, who was also an Aberdeen Harbour Commissioner, received this telegram at 3.15pm and straightaway took it to Police Inspector Gabriel. He instructed the inspector to take the message down the quay to the Captain Pilot, William Clark, who was responsible for getting out the Aberdeen life-boat and its crew.

While these telegrams were being sent, and sometimes received, the Stonehaven life-boat crew had set their foresail, mainsail and jib and put out their oars, in pursuit of the distressed barque. (82) There was a south-south-westerly wind and a good breeze, but no heavy sea to speak of. The barque, according to some witnesses, behaved peculiarly. Instead of heaving to, so that the life-boat whose aid she had signalled could reach her, she continued to sail steadily northwards at five and a half knots, with most of her sails set. Sometimes she was steered well and sometimes wildly. The Stonehaven life-boatmen only ever saw three men on her deck, although her size merited a much larger crew. Flying her red rescue flag, the *St George* managed to come within a hundred yards of the barque off the Bay of Nigg. The life-boatmen were close enough to see that she was the *Grace Darling* of Blyth. They were about to hail her when the distress signal was pulled down. Part of it stuck and was left hanging half-way up; the other part of the signal came down altogether. By the time the *Grace Darling* appeared round the Girdleness, and was visible from the North Pier, she was flying no signals.

Since the *Grace Darling* and her crew no longer seemed to need rescuing, the Stonehaven life-boatmen hauled down their sails and masts and stowed them away. They then pulled for Aberdeen at about four o'clock. On shore, the Captain Pilot felt deflated as well as relieved. The *Grace Darling* did not seem to have anything the matter with her. (83) When handed the telegram by Inspector Gabriel, he had asked some fisher people to warn the life-boat crew. He also saw the mate of the life-boat at the North Pier and instructed him to get the



One of the high waves which run up the navigation channel of Aberdeen harbour in an easterly or south-easterly gale.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

boat ready as soon as possible. Half an hour had passed between the time he was given the telegram message and the moment the Stonehaven life-boat was seen coming round the breakwater. By that time the Aberdeen life-boat crew were standing by their boat, their cork life-jackets on and the doors of the shed open. With the *Grace Darling* still heading north under sail, would there be nothing for them to do?

Immediately the Stonehaven crew pulled round the point of Aberdeen's new South Breakwater, the Captain Pilot sent up a pole and ball signal at the point of the North Pier. This signal was to indicate to the Stonehaven men that they should keep well to the south side of the channel and seek the lee of the new breakwater. This new protection, constructed between 1869 and 1873, projected much further out to sea than its predecessor. It had the effect of breaking the wind and waves from a southerly direction and leaving the channel immediately behind the breakwater comparatively smooth. Out into the middle of the channel, the swell built up again. The safest course for boats entering harbour was to keep well to the south after crossing the bar. Local fishermen understood the pole and ball signal to mean that they should not cross the bar hurriedly, but should keep to the south and 'watch their chance of a smooth'. (84) Ignorant of the conditions at Aberdeen harbour bar and of its signals, the Stonehaven men failed to understand this. That afternoon, the sea at the bar was a tricky one for those unaccustomed to it. 'The sea was in long smooths with heavy runs

when they came, and if advantage was taken of a smooth a boat could get in safely.' (84) The motion of the sea at the bar was aggravated by a considerable flood in the river, an ebbing tide and the fact that low water was only half an hour away. All this made for some peculiar currents and motions at Aberdeen harbour mouth.

With a drogue trailing behind their boat to keep her end on to the waves, the *St George*'s crew crossed the bar. Once over it, instead of holding to the back of the new South Breakwater, the Stonehaven boat made straight up the channel towards the staging of the old breakwater. Half-way between the old and the new structures, and directly south of the point of the North Pier, the *St George* was caught by a huge wave which was just on the point of breaking. When it struck, this first wave lifted up the life-boat's stern, the aftersteersman fell to one side and the boat slewed round to the northwards. A second wave caught her and the *St George* capsized, end over end. When the Captain Pilot saw the first sea hit the *St George*, he ran up the pier, jumped onto the parapet and waved for the Aberdeen life-boat to be launched off the beach. The Aberdeen boat was being hauled out of its shed and down the three hundred yards to the water's edge before the Stonehaven boat capsized under the force of the second lump of water. When she overturned, those harbour officials on the north and south sides of the channel saw her remain upside down on the same spot for about three minutes. Six of the crew who had managed to cling to her life-ropes righted her and got onboard. One of the volunteer oarsmen remained in the water, clinging to a life-rope at the stern. The coxswain, second coxswain and two oarsmen were being carried away northwards out to sea. The second coxswain, floating towards the pier, was already dead — killed when the stern of the capsizing boat struck him.

Even 'after she righted she was still held at the place as if by an anchor'. (85) The *St George* remained fixed in this position for a whole minute or two after she rocked upright. Some on shore reckoned the current going out and the sea coming in were counteracting each other to produce a lull and prevent the boat drifting. The Captain Pilot thought she was fixed to this point in the channel 'as if fast by some of her gear to stones at the bottom'. (86) Captain Pilot Clark now ran up the pier and helped the Aberdeen life-boat crew to haul their boat and carriage back up the beach and round to the harbour. Once he had got the life-boat carriage started back up the beach, the Captain Pilot returned to the North Pier. There he saw that the *St George* was now drifting away from mid-channel and was being washed towards the pier. He again ran back to countermand his previous change of plan and ordered the Aberdeen life-boat launched from the beach. But the

Aberdeen boat's carriage was only got back to the water's edge with difficulty. The sand was very soft in places and there was less help than needed because many people were watching the plight of the Stonehaven boat's crew. With six shocked, exhausted men aboard it, and one clinging to its stern, the *St George* was drifting helplessly. It was now 4.25pm.

At this point, Mr Inglis and several other Harbour Commissioners arrived at the North Pier. Mr Inglis had Police Inspector Gabriel order the steam tug out to the harbour mouth to search for the men in the water. The steam tug captain, John Bruce, had reckoned there would be no work for his vessel in the existing weather conditions. At three o'clock he had gone to dinner without telling the Captain Pilot, although he was supposed to do so. When Inspector Gabriel reached the tug at about 4.30pm, Captain Bruce had still not returned. It would take another fifteen minutes to fetch him and his crew. At the point of the North Pier, Captain Patrick of the *Alexander Hall* threw a line out to the Stonehaven men, but it fouled and fell short. No rocket or mortar apparatus was used to fire a line. Even if a life-line had reached the *St George*, and been pulled in by the people on the pier, the life-boat would have come up against the platform jutting out along the pier wall. With no one able to steer her or fend her off, the *St George* would have smashed against the under-shoeing. The survivors could easily have been thrown overboard again and this time probably drowned. The *St George* wallowed about the point of the North Pier for several minutes, as the surf pulled her round behind it. Another sea struck her and knocked overboard a young volunteer oarsman — a nineteen-year-old Aberdeen seaman called William Scott. Scott drifted away northwards. Another wave carried the life-boat twenty yards along behind the North Pier. At this point the five men still aboard and the man clinging to the stern all managed to scramble ashore with the assistance of those on the pier. 'The survivors of the Stonehaven life-boat were ashore before the Aberdeen boat was afloat'. (87)

The Aberdeen boat had been at the water's edge only twelve minutes after the first order to launch her was given. It took another eight minutes before she was properly afloat. A medical student who was watching calculated that sixteen minutes elapsed between the Stonehaven life-boat capsizing and the Aberdeen boat being in the water. (88) When it first reported the accident, the 'Aberdeen Journal' spoke of an 'unaccountable delay'. (89) Apart from the soft sand, the lack of helpers and the countermanded orders, the Aberdeen boat got stuck on a sandbank just as she was being pulled off the shore. Once clear, the Aberdeen life-boatmen could not pull out to sea too vigorously, as they had to scan the water in search of the five men who had been carried

away from the *St George*. They stayed out for three-quarters of an hour and picked up only one, insensible seaman — William Scott. Scott was almost beyond the point of recovery so they gave up the search, pulled back to shore and took him to the beach hut which was specially equipped for restoring life to victims of a near drowning. Treated to a warm bath, warm blankets and a heated bed, Scott recovered with difficulty. The four men who died were: James Leiper, coxswain; John Brown, second coxswain; Alexander Main and James Lees.

The original cause of all this trouble, the *Grace Darling*. had held her course north, still behaving strangely. After lowering her distress signals before she came round the Girdleness, her captain hoisted them again when his ship was a mile and a half northward of the North Pier. When darkness fell, as he passed Buchanness, the master lit distress lamps and burned a tar barrel. Opposite Peterhead, where he could next expect the help of a life-boat, he doused these lamps and passed Peterhead harbour with his ship in darkness. The Peterhead life-boat, her officials warned by telegram from Aberdeen, put out their boat after some difficulty but failed to get off far enough before the *Grace Darling* had passed on north. Her captain still kept his sails aloft and his crew down below, regularly treated to stiff tots of grog or neat whisky every hour. (90) He insisted to his crew that he knew a safe beach to ground her on, where the men could wade ashore. Eventually, at one-thirty on Saturday morning, the barque was put ashore near St Combs, possibly in mistake for Fraserburgh beach. Once aground, she broke up very quickly. There was only one survivor from a total of eleven men — a Norwegian seaman called Stevensen.

The monthly general meeting of the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners was held only three days after the capsize of the Stonehaven life-boat at the mouth of Aberdeen harbour. By the time they met, 'a good deal of indignation (had been) expressed in the town..... at the conduct of the officials in charge of the life-boat, for their delay in bringing it to the scene of the action, the absence of the rocket apparatus, the steam tug, or any other means usually employed for saving life'. (91) Mr Inglis was being blamed for not passing the telegram message quickly enough to the Captain Pilot. The Aberdeen life-boat crew was being blamed for the loss of the four Stonehaven men's lives. Lord Provost Leslie, who presided over the Harbour Commissioners, had already decided that a committee of investigation should be set up. His proposed committee was made all the more imperative by a letter from an Aberdeen solicitor, who had been hired by the Aberdeen life-boat crew. The solicitor requested an immediate enquiry on the grounds that: 'My clients find that their character and conduct is the subject of much adverse criticism, arising from the facts of the

case being unknown to the public, and they desire the fullest investigation, in order that the blame, if it lie at their door, may be brought home to them; but that if it be not so, the blame may be removed.' (92) The Harbour Commissioners decided to hold an open inquiry, which members of the press and public could attend. At its first meeting the investigatory committee learnt that a Board of Trade enquiry had been set up into the loss of the *Grace Darling*. The enquiry would open at Peterhead, but that part of it dealing with the Aberdeen and Stonehaven life-boats would be held in Aberdeen. The Commissioners therefore decided against proceeding with their own inquiry, 'until the enquiry of the Board of Trade is concluded....., when it would be seen whether it may still be necessary for the Harbour Commissioners to proceed with any further enquiry on their part'. (93)

The Board of Trade enquiry opened at Peterhead on 17th March 1874 and moved to the Sheriff Court House, Aberdeen on 23rd March. The more articulate of the Stonehaven life-boatmen, who testified on the first day, were united in criticising the Aberdonians' conduct and in their own notions of what should have been done. They thought the Aberdeen life-boat should already have been launched and lying at the harbour mouth when the *St George* capsized. They faulted the absence of any life-lines thrown by hand, mortar or rocket. They also reckoned the steam tug could have been got down channel immediately they overturned. Had all this prudence been exercised, they reckoned three men could have been taken from the water alive. There would have been one, unavoidable death instead of four drownings. The Aberdeen life-saving service was being blamed for the loss of three men's lives. The local pride of the North-East's sea-going communities is their strength and their curse. Applied to their life-boats, this pride means each harbour's service is actively supported and never short of volunteers. But it can also lead fishers — the Stonehaven folk in this case — to see 'our' boat badly let down by 'their', the Aberdonians', men.

The Aberdeen defence was strong in some places, flimsy at others. The harbour officers could not have sent the life-boat to the harbour bar beforehand, since they could never have foreseen that the *St George* would be the object of their rescue mission. The *Grace Darling* was the vessel in distress and they could not launch their life-boat into the harbour channel or off the beach until they saw where the barque was likely to sink or come ashore. As to launching the *Bon-Accord* off the beach, then taking her back ashore and re-launching in the harbour channel, Captain Pilot Clark stated reasonably that he 'never knew of an instance in which the life-boat had been launched from the beach and found that it could not reach the wreck, and that it

was then taken ashore, launched in the navigation channel, and reached the wreck from it.' (94) As to the 'unaccountable delay' in launching the Aberdeen life-boat, the hindrance caused by soft sand and an awkward sandbank were not of human making. The delays caused by human error were understandable. At one point, when they saw the *St George* in distress, the Aberdeen crew had run for the old, 1841 life-boat, which had recently been removed from her Broad Hill house and moored in the entrance channel. (95) There was no reluctance on the part of the life-boat crew to go out. The men were also held back by the Captain Pilot's twice countermanding his own instructions. But he did so in his hurry to get out to the Stonehaven boat as quickly as possible, rather than because he dithered indecisively. This accumulation of nuisances amounted to a delay of seven to eight minutes, beyond the normal launching time, in getting off the Aberdeen boat.

On the want of life-lines from the pier, it is unlikely that the Stonehaven men in the water, some of whom may have been injured, would have been able to hold on in their shocked, benumbed state. (96) If the *St George* itself had been got hold of, and dragged alongside the North Pier, the survivors aboard it might have faired badly against the side of the stone platform. A number of the harbour officers claimed that the steam tug had not been present because the tide at the bar was too low and the sea too heavy. These were spurious claims. At the time of the accident there was twelve feet of water on the bar — more than enough for a steam tug — and the sea was 'not so heavy as to hinder a steam tug going out'. (97) The absence of a steam tug is accounted for by the tug captain's extra-long dinner break (over an hour and a half) and his leaving his post without telling the Captain Pilot. Had the steam tug got quickly down channel, as she might well have, it is possible that she could have backed down on those life-boatmen who were carried away from the *St George* and picked them up, injured but still alive.

When Sheriff Comrie Thomson delivered judgement on the *Grace Darling* affair on Thursday 27th March, his findings were very cautious and hardly as critical as the evidence might have allowed. From the volume of rotting wood that came ashore after the *Grace Darling* was wrecked, from the speed with which she broke up and from the puzzling behaviour of her captain, he might reasonably have concluded that she was an unseaworthy ship deliberately sent out to wreck herself and allow an insurance claim. The Sheriff firmly rejected this possibility. He attributed the captain's management of his crew and his signal flags to his unwillingness to see the vessel claimed as salvage. On the conduct of Aberdeen's Captain Pilot and the Aberdeen life-boat crew,

he found them all blameless. He did make two practical suggestions on the future of the Aberdeen life-saving service: that an additional life-boat be stationed at Aberdeen and that the facilities for launching it into the harbour channel be improved immediately. Comrie Thomson did not think that the presence of a steam tug 'could have averted any part of the catastrophe.' (98) He did indicate that the regulations governing the presence of a fully-manned tug, with steam up at all times, should be properly complied with in future. He also implied that the steam tug should have been got out and sent to work searching for the men in the water, even if there was only the slightest chance of success. His conclusions on the absence of the tug were not as hard-hitting as they might have been in the circumstances. The Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners could feel they had got off the hook lightly.

Aberdeen's Lord Provost certainly expressed his 'satisfaction' at the 'result, (which) had been to relieve the Harbour Trustees and himself, as Chairman, from a serious weight of responsibility'. (99) Considering themselves exonerated by the Board of Trade findings, the Harbour Commissioners decided that any enquiry of their own was superfluous and not worth pursuing. However, the Commissioners did immediately take up the suggestion of a second life-boat at Aberdeen. This had first been proposed by Captain Pilot Clark, when he gave his evidence, and repeated by Sheriff Comrie Thomson. Captain Pilot Clark had also given his opinion that this second boat should be under the control of the R.N.L.I. Accordingly, in September 1874, the Pilotage Committee of the Harbour Commissioners met the Assistant Inspector of the R.N.L.I. to discuss the purchase of a new life-boat and its placement under the R.N.L.I. The Harbour Commissioners insisted that the pilots should always be available for their harbour duties, but the R.N.L.I. officials thought such a requirement would interfere with the efficient operation of an R.N.L.I. station at Aberdeen. The R.N.L.I. refused to take over any or all of the Aberdeen life-saving service. (101) Unable to cooperate with the national institution, the Harbour Commissioners now set up their own sub-committee to take the necessary steps for procuring a new life-boat.

That sub-committee asked the R.N.L.I.'s advice on which life-boat model the Institution's inspectors reckoned most suitable for Aberdeen's purposes. There was an outright difference of opinion over the model recommended by Captain Pilot Clark, the local expert, and the one suggested by the specialists from the national body. The Captain Pilot wanted the new Aberdeen boat designed along the same lines as the existing one — a 35 foot x 9 foot boat with ten oars. The Institution specialists recommended a boat that was faster pulling than the existing Aberdeen model. Captain Pilot Clark insisted that an easy,

safe launch was a far more important factor at Aberdeen beach than a speedy passage and that the present Aberdeen boat was a very safe one. The sub-committee accepted his recommendations, but there was one significant dissenter. William Duthie, from the local family of shipowners and shipbuilders, argued long and hard that the new life-boat should be an R.N.L.I. model and that it should be operated by the R.N.L.I. itself. In other words, Duthie wanted the R.N.L.I. to have an important role in life-saving at Aberdeen. Defeated in the sub-committee, he took his arguments to a full meeting of the Harbour Board, where he was again defeated. His attempt to introduce the R.N.L.I. into Aberdeen in 1874-75 failed. The members of the sub-committee did defer to their local experts when William Hall and the Captain Pilot recommended that the proposed boat should be clencher (clinker) built and constructed of larch, rather than diagonally planked with mahogany. The new life-boat, like the old one, was to have no sails or masts and to be steered with a sweep oar from either end. (102) The sub-committee gathered together so many different designs that its members were eventually considering no less than seven life-boat models. The one they eventually ordered, in May 1875, was to be 33 feet long, with a beam of 8 feet 3 inches and a depth of 3 feet 2 inches. Messrs. Forrest and Son, of Limehouse, were to build it; just as they had built the 1853 boat. The Harbour Commissioners insisted that the new boat should not cost more than £385. (103)

The new life-boat arrived in Aberdeen in late September 1875. It was built to the cost and specifications the sub-committee had demanded. (104) The Commissioners had originally planned to construct a slipway on the waterfront section of Findlay's herring curing yard at Pocra Quay. The new life-boat would be launched down this slipway into the tidal harbour. They soon changed their minds and constructed a new boathouse over the water, so that the life-boat floated in the water of the harbour, inside her own shed. In a fierce gale, the life-boat banged about in her boathouse and broke up everything inside it. (105) The Commissioners therefore changed their minds again and spent over £543 building a life-boathouse near the Aberdeen, Leith and Clyde Shipping Company's wharf. The new life-boat was rolled out of this shed on a carriage and launched into the channel from the slipway below the Lower Jetty. Not until 1890 was the life-boathouse removed to Shelter Jetty in the lower harbour basin. In 1891, £141 was spent on hoisting apparatus, which lifted the boat clear of the water when she was not needed. (106) The life-boat was lifted vertically with a hand-operated windlass and laid on chocks. This wooden boathouse and its hoisting gear is still within living memory. In February 1874, the Commissioners had also resolved to remove the old life-boat to a new

Quarterly practice of the Aberdeen 'beach' life-boat 'Bon-Accord I' c.1900-1910
(photo by courtesy of Andrew Cluer, Lantern Books, Albert Street)

The shed at Footdee where the 'harbour' life-boat, 'Bon-Accord II' was lifted from the water by grabs and stored undercover.
(photo courtesy of Donald Smith)

site at the north-east corner of North Footdee Square. Just about £39 was spent on putting up a wooden shed on the lip of the beach.

While they had been deciding on the cost, design and housing of a new life-boat, the Harbour Commissioners were also faced with the crew's demand for an increase in their pay. The men wanted their annual retainers increased by £3 each — from £5 to £8 for the coxswain, from £4 to £7 for the second coxswain and from £3 to £6 for each of the crew. The life-boatmen also asked for 10/- by day and 20/- by night for each time they went out to a wreck and a payment of 5/- per quarter for going out on exercises. The Commissioners agreed to give the coxswain £6 per year, the second coxswain £5 and each of the crew £4. The 5/- quarterly exercise allowance was granted. They also allowed the men 10/- each for every time they went out to a wreck, day or night, and an additional 10/- each if lives were saved. (107) The crew was an experienced one. The coxswain was the thirty-nine-year-old Alexander Paterson — better known as 'Dycie' among the Fittie folk. By 1874, 'Dycie' had been seventeen years in the life-boat — the last five as coxswain and the previous five as second coxswain. When the new life-boat reached Aberdeen in September 1875, he and his crew manned both her and the old, 1853 boat. Aberdeen now had two fully-operational life-boats and one, skilled life-boat crew. The old life-boat, stationed at the beach, was properly called the *Bon-Accord I* but mostly referred to, colloquially and officially, as the 'Beach' life-boat. The new boat was named the *Bon-Accord II* but always termed the 'Harbour' life-boat.

CHAPTER 4

FROM SHIPWRECKED SCHOONERS TO GROUNDED TRAWLERS 1875-1902

In the thirty years which followed the Board of Trade inquiry, the two Aberdeen life-boats were mostly concerned in rescue missions to shipwrecked schooners and brigs. But the days of the sailing ship were numbered and from the 1870's Aberdeen was emerging as a major herring and white-fishing port. By the beginning of the 20th century the two *Bon Accords* were being called out almost entirely to stranded trawlers and grounded steamers. The life-boats themselves did not change. Neither of them had sails and they were still pulled alongside a wreck by the crew's raw muscle. More sophisticatedly, they were sometimes towed by a steam tug to within easy reach of a stranded vessel. Tug and pulling life-boat became the heavenly twins of shipwrecked seamen and fishermen. The telephone, when it could play a part, was also brought into use in rescue work. In the life-boat service of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, technical sophistication began to complement the simplicity of human will-power, courage and strength.

Within a month of the new life-boat's arrival in September 1875, Aberdeen was hit by a two-week-long storm. From the very first day of the gale, both life-boats were kept outside their sheds, ready for an emergency. The *Bon Accord II* lay in the channel at Abercromby Jetty, while the *Bon-Accord I* was hauled down to the high water mark at the back of the North Pier. In the case of the beach life-boat this cut a good twelve minutes off the time taken between calling out the crew and the boat touching the water. A lesson was being learned from the much-criticised delay when the Stonehaven boat capsized. The harbour life-boat went out on her first rescue on 17 October 1875, when the Swedish barque *Walhalla*, with a cargo of timber, struck on the harbour bar and broke her helm. The peculiar effects of the fresh, the ebb tide and the heavy swell spun the vessel round several times in the channel, out of control. Under Coxswain Paterson, the new life-boat was rowed down channel from Abercromby Jetty to the *Walhalla*. The Swedes left her eagerly and were only persuaded to return when some life-boatmen, with a dozen fishermen and pilots from another boat, boarded the barque and rigged a tow rope to the pier. Hundreds of hands on the quay took up the rope and pulled the timber ship alongside Abercromby Jetty. She settled down in the Lower Basin, aground, after she was taken in tow by the steam tug *Heather Bell*. (108)

Early the following Friday morning, a message from Cove warned Aberdeen harbour officials that a schooner was labouring northwards. The two life-boats were again got ready for an emergency. After the vessel appeared round the Girdleness at about ten o'clock, it was soon clear that she would not make the harbour. As the *Isabella Millar* drifted gradually towards the sand, from two miles offshore, the *Bon-Accord I* was pulled steadily along the beach in her carriage — always abreast of the stricken vessel. It was quicker and less strenuous to have dozens of people haul the boat overland rather than launch her immediately and have ten men row her miles northwards by sea. Just before eleven a.m., the schooner grounded three-quarters of a mile north of the Bathing Station. Almost as she struck, the life-boat was out alongside her. Her crew of five, including the captain, were taken to shore in two to three minutes. (109) So long as he had some warning of a vessel in distress, 'Dycie' could pare down the rescue time to the barest minimum.

Even without a warning, and working in difficult conditions, the coxswain and his crew could get out quickly. Early in November 1876, the small schooner *Dunchattan* came ashore at high tide, behind the North Pier and only fifty yards from the life-boathouse. It was a dark night, there was little lighting at Fittie and the roads there were badly maintained. Despite these problems, the life-boat was beside the *Dunchattan* in less than fifteen minutes and rescued all four men on board. The 'Aberdeen Journal' made much of the 'most praiseworthy alacrity' with which the life-boat was launched. (110) Even though the Stonehaven life-boat tragedy was two and a half years in the past, the Aberdonians were still on the defensive about the promptness of their life-boat service. Neither of the two life-boats were called out during the tempestuous gales which lasted all of December 1876, but in 1877 the beach boat was out on two rescue missions. In the first month of the year, six men were taken off the brig *Countess of Seafield* when she struck very heavily off Donmouth in a hurricane-force wind. (111) On a Thursday morning in December that same year, at the height of a south-south-easterly gale, the 229-ton schooner *Nina* was blown off course while taking coals to Boulogne. Her captain tried to make Aberdeen harbour, failed and decided to run her ashore in the bay. The Captain Pilot and his men had been sharing the look-out all night and got out the beach life-boat. The boat and her carriage were again hauled along the beach, keeping abreast of the *Nina*. Just north of the Bathing Station, the life-boat was manned and launched and followed the schooner ashore. Immediately the vessel struck, the life-boat pulled up to her starboard side and took off all seven men. 'Had the life-boat been ten minutes later, the probability is that the whole of the

crew would have been drowned, for no sooner had the men got into the boat than the vessel's mainmast went over the side and she immediately began to break up, and soon after became a total wreck.' (112) The speed of the life-boat crew was more than a matter of local pride. It could also be crucial in saving lives.

'Dycie' could also get up speed when the steam tug was used along with the life-boat. In pitch darkness in mid-February 1880, the life-boatmen went out to the 36-ton schooner *Isabella*. Carrying bricks and drain tiles from Morrisonhaven to Aberdeen, the *Isabella* struck the platform at the end of the North Pier and sank almost immediately. The tug *Derwent* towed the harbour life-boat down channel and cast her off opposite the sunken schooner. The life-boatmen rowed close to the rigging, which was still above water, and took off one man. The master, however, was pulled under five times as the vessel rolled over in heavy seas and the rigging went below the water. He was picked up before his sixth ducking. (113) Later that same year, the beach life-boat went out in a south-westerly gale and rescued four of a crew, including the master, from the coal-carrying schooner *Cassowary*, which had run ashore nearly opposite the Bathing Station. (114) On this rescue mission, and an earlier one, the life-boat was got out to sea so quickly that it reached the wreck and took off the men before the coastguards even got to the shoreline with their Manby apparatus.

1881 was a busy year for the rescuers at Aberdeen. There were four shipping accidents in the space of twelve months. In the first week of March, a three-masted schooner was spotted by the pilots and life-boatmen on look-out at the North Pier. Apparently unmanageable, she was being pushed irreversibly towards the sands at the Donmouth. The beach life-boat was already standing by and was hurried along the sands. The vessel was guided ashore with lamp signals flashed to her by Captain Pilot Clark. When the *Morford and Trubey* struck the sands about four hundred yards south of the river, the life-boat was launched and pulled out to the wreck. All seven sailors tumbled and scrambled into the life-boat, which brought the exhausted men back to the beach. (115) In November, the same life-boat was involved in a more unusual effort. The 627-ton Canadian vessel *Thomas Cochran* came too close inshore while waiting for a steam tug. She struck heavily on the beach just south of Donmouth. Although her crew had been advised by the tugmen that a life-boat would soon be on its way, the twelve men got out their ship's longboat and set off in the direction of the harbour. After they had pulled two hundred yards or so, they met the beach life-boat, which was being towed out by the tug. The sailors transferred to the life-boat and were landed at Pocra Pier. (116)

Aberdeen's small fleet of white-fishing boats, which went out daily to the small-line, was caught in a sudden squall in early December 1881. One of the fishing boats was further off than the others and was still well out of harbour when the full force of the storm came on. As the yawl laboured heavily towards the harbour entrance, a steam tug went out and took her in tow. (117) Just a few days before Christmas, the brigantine *St Clair* struck heavily on the Girdle Rock, out beyond the harbour mouth. She took in water very quickly and her crew abandoned her as she drifted away northwards. As the five sailors rowed for shore in their small boat, one of their two oars snapped and they had to begin sculling with the other. One of the pilot boats, commanded by a life-boatman, went out over the bar and managed to take the seamen aboard. This was done with much difficulty, as both boats were tossing about wildly. (118)

In 1883, the Aberdeen life-boats were in danger again, with four rescues in the first three months of the year. On the first of these missions, the harbour life-boat itself capsized and three of the crew almost drowned. On a Saturday morning in mid-January, the harbour boat had been standing by as the screw steamer *Duchess* entered Aberdeen harbour only three quarters of an hour before low water. The steamer had a full cargo of coal on board, weighing her deep in the water. She struck ground at a point mid-way between the old and the new South Breakwaters. A heavy gale was blowing from the south-east at the time. The life-boat easily managed to take off all eight crew members. Then it was signalled to go back and put some men aboard the steamer. They would help secure the tow rope which a steam tug had got aboard the *Duchess*. At one p.m. the life-boat went back alongside the *Duchess* to take these men off. With the sea running heavily, the life-boat had difficulty getting near the steamer. As she did so, a powerful wave struck the boat and capsized her.

When a life-boat overturns within sight of the shore, there is an abrupt suspension of belief. It is difficult for those watching to take in what has happened. This is followed by the panic of helplessness and the anxiety of waiting for an unpredictable tragedy to unfold. At Fittie, the signs of these emotions were women screaming hysterically and men openly weeping. When the life-boat righted, all of the crew except three regained their seats. Those on board the boat had lost their oars and could not help their comrades in the water. James Morrice, the second coxswain and a powerful swimmer, swam one hundred and fifty yards to the rocks on the Torry shore. The two others, Alex Hunter and William Guyan, were exhausted by the cold and shock and were unable to help themselves. They were only kept afloat by their cork life-jackets and were pulled from the water about

The North Pier in a gale, with high seas running up the channel.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Dept.)

three hundred yards beyond the spot where Morrice came ashore. They all survived their bruises, cuts and broken ribs. The rocket apparatus on the Torry side was used to take ashore the four men still stranded on the *Duchess*. Within twenty four hours, the steamer's decks had been cleared from stem to stern — funnel, bridge, bulwarks, all carried away by the sea. She was a total wreck. (119)

Less than a month later, science and human muscle power worked profitably together at a rescue. About two o'clock on Saturday afternoon, 10th February 1883, the harbour life-boat went out over the bar to help the crew of a large steamer that was drifting north. The ship was too far north by the time the life-boat got out to the open sea. The boat was pulled back to shore, remounted on its carriage and driven at furious speed — with the crew still aboard — towards Donmouth. But the steamer drifted past the Don and the life-boat carriage could go no further. Her crew and their helpers forded the river and ran north along the beach until the vessel suddenly stopped drifting. In the meantime, 'the latest of our perfected scientific instruments proved its value.' (120) Aberdeen harbour officials had made a telephone call to the Bridge of Don coastguard station, warning them to look out for the doomed ship. With the life-boat crew's help, the coastguards used their rocket apparatus to rig up a line and cradle between ship and shore. All twenty one people were taken safely off the 1,137-ton esparto grass carrier *Tasmania*. The use of the telephone

at the wreck of the *Tasmania* is the first recorded instance of this instrument's use in an Aberdeen rescue.

On Thursday 25th and Friday 26th March 1883, the storm then blowing at Aberdeen was so violent that the sea was breaking over the South Breakwater even at low water. Only the most seaworthy sailing ships could weather such a storm. At the height of the hurricane, early on Friday morning, two schooners were driven ashore at Aberdeen within hours of each other. The fate of their crews is worth contrasting with the *Venus-Armitstead* tragedy thirty one years earlier. The *Queen* was the first to come ashore, just south of the Bathing Station. The vessel had failed to answer her helm when trying to enter the harbour. When she was forced north of the pier by a squall, the Captain Pilot realised the schooner could not possibly get clear of the beach. The fishermen on shore held up a bright lamp as a guiding light to the ship's master, who ran her up on the sands. Although the *Queen* was only nine years old, she was a small vessel of 88 tons, with a full cargo of coal. Unable to withstand the impact, her back broke and she settled down very heavily in the sand. Almost the whole population of Fittie, all very excited, turned out to help launch the life-boat, which took half and hour to reach the wreck. The life-boatmen took so long because the waves prevented their boat getting alongside the schooner's leeside. When they did get into shelter at the north side of the ship, they had only persuaded two mariners to jump when the life-boat was tossed away seawards again. Several more minutes of straining, aching rowing followed, until the life-boat was returned to the north side and the other two sailors jumped to safety. (121)

The life-boat crew must have been very tired after pulling their boat around the *Queen* in heavy seas for about an hour. But they took no rest. (122) Once they got the *Queen*'s four crew members ashore, they went round to the Lower Basin and pulled the harbour life-boat round into the channel, ready for another emergency. The call-out was not long in coming. The local schooner *Tom Duff* had been sighted off Aberdeen at four o'clock in the morning. Built in 1839, the *Tom Duff* had been forty four years at sea and was one of Aberdeen's oldest vessels. She came round the South Breakwater about five p.m., her men exhausted after a stormy night's work aloft. The sailors were baffled by the tricky winds in the lee of the Torry lands, and too tired to stop the schooner drifting across the entrance channel to the North Pier, where she struck heavily. The tug *Heather Bell* straightaway towed the life-boat down channel to the *Tom Duff*, which meantime had been pushed onto the platform by the swell. On her first approach, the life-boat was driven back by the motion of the sea. Her second attempt to get alongside proved very dangerous. The life-boat was

picked up by the swell and carried right over the bows of the *Tom Duff*. She had several oars smashed. The life-boatmen had a lucky escape.

The *Tom Duff*'s crew had managed to get a line to the pier and haul a hawser back aboard. They tightened it in readiness for being pulled across the few yards of water which separated their vessel from the pier. The water was all hands and mouth — it clutched and sucked as it swept back and fore across the schooner's deck. The crew were forced up into the rigging for safety's sake. Three of them were rescued from it when the rocket apparatus arrived and the rocket team got a line and cradle across to the schooner. With two men still to be taken off, the *Tom Duff* was washed off the platform. She drifted aimlessly in the channel, but at least the life-boat was now able to get alongside her. After several buffetings, the life-boat crew managed to pull up to the *Tom Duff*, whose two crew members jumped into the belly of the boat. In a shipwreck, as in a car crash, those involved are left with a confused impression of the sequence of events or even of what actually took place. We get some idea of this confusion from a press reporter's interview with the mate of the *Tom Duff*. In recounting how three of the crew were taken off by life-line, the mate made no mention of the life-boat's presence, even though it had leapt right over the schooner's bow. (123)

On a Monday evening in mid-November 1887, the Torry small-line fishing boat *Comply* was just a mile north-east of the North Pier when she was struck by a sudden squall and swamped. Three men and a boy were drowned. The skipper, William Walker, was left clinging to the starboard gunwale of the boat. It was getting on for 6.30pm. The sky was dark, the showers heavy. So overcast and gloomy was it that the pilots on look out failed to notice the accident. Warned by another yawl, the Captain Pilot sent out the life-boat, which was launched off the sloping point of the North Pier. At first, the harbour officers had intended launching the harbour boat, but the low tide prevented this. (it was probably as a result of this difficulty that the harbour life-boat was rehoused in 1890, suspended over the water in a wooden shed adjoining the Lower Jetty.) In the darkness, the life-boatmen pulled out to the wrong yawl. Captain Pilot Clark saw their mistake and put up flares to direct them to the *Comply*. Half an hour after the yawl had overturned, skipper Walker was still clinging to it. The life-boat crew spotted him and were only twenty yards away when he slipped from the boat and disappeared. His would-be rescuers rowed round and round the spot, but saw not a trace of the man. The *Comply*, damaged beyond repair, was taken in tow and landed at Fittie.

When seamen or fishermen are in distress, they are not asked their

Beach life-boat 'Bon-Accord I' being launched.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Journals Ltd.)

nationality before they are saved. The Fittie men would as well rescue Russian sailors as Torry fishermen. On 18th December 1893, the life-boat was towed miles north along the coast by the tug *Granite City* when the Russian schooner *Ernest Alfred* went ashore near the mouth of the Eggie Burn, Belhelvie. The news of the Kronstadt sailors' plight had been telephoned through to Aberdeen. 'Dycie' and his crew got into the life-boat and were towed away north. Before the life-boat reached Belhelvie beach, the coastguards had used their rockets to get a line aboard the schooner. But the Russian crew could not read the English instructions on the life-line, so it was impossible to rig up the cradle. The life-boat's arrival offered a way out of this quandary, although several of the life-boatmen were almost washed overboard when their boat cast off from the tug and was tossed about in heavy seas. When the life-boat got close to the Russian's starboard side, the crew jumped one after another into the arms of the boatmen. The life-boat landed all nine men on the beach, but her crew found the swell too powerful for them to launch her again without a carriage. The life-boat was abandoned and left at Belhelvie temporarily. (124)

Another foreign schooner, a Norwegian this time, went up on the North Pier five years later. The harbour life-boat had to be rowed down channel against terrific waves before she was in a position to take off the *Levang*'s captain and six seamen. This rescue took place almost within the harbour itself. The *Levang* had successfully cleared the entrance and got as far up channel as the Round House when she was swept right round and dashed against the pier between the Lower Jetty and Abercromby Jetty. The crew got on to the life-boat with only

the drenched clothes they were wearing and were thankful to make good their escape from the small timber-carrier. (125) A third schooner got into difficulties two years later, in August 1900. The 56-ton *Welcome Home* went up on the sands on a dark, wet, stormy night. She lay just behind the North Pier, among the patch of stones directly ahead of the life-boathouse. Between launching and regaining the shore, the beach life-boat took only ten minutes to rescue all four men from the Portmahomack vessel. (126)

While the beach life-boat was still concerned for most of the 1890's with rescuing the crews of stricken sailing vessels, the harbour life-boat was increasingly involved in missions to fishing boats and trawlers. Only three years after the *Bon Accord I* went out to the *Comply*, the *Bon-Accord II* went out to another Torry fishing yawl — *A544*. Crossing the bar in mountain-high seas in early October 1890, Skipper Caie's fishing boat was swamped and the four-man crew thrown into the water. The life-boatmen were already standing by and quickly launched their boat. With great difficulty, three fishermen were picked up near the beach at the Torry side of the channel. The fourth man, the skipper, clung to an oar and managed to make the shore unaided. Caie could hardly walk when he was washed ashore. His three crewmen had their legs badly injured when they were thrown violently against the yawl in the water. The yawl, which was not insured, was valued at £25 and its lines at £12. (127)

In the June-August herring fishing season at Aberdeen, the sailing drifters entering harbour occasionally got into difficulty. In mid-July 1893, the Inverness drifter *Reaper* collided with the Aberdeen smack *Thomas Chalmers*, while passing her in the channel in a strong, northerly breeze and heaving seas. Both boats went ashore on the south side of the channel. The *Reaper* got stuck among the rocks and her crew yelled for assistance. Within half an hour, the steam tug had towed the life-boat to the spot and the crew of seven were got off. The *Reaper* filled with water and her catch of herring was lost, along with most of her fleet of nets. The drifter was valued at £150 and her nets and herring at £140. (128) Although Aberdeen was now becoming an important herring and trawling port, the well-established fishing yawls continued in use for a long time. About 5 o'clock on the morning of 13th February 1896, the Footdee fishing boat *Delight* with five men aboard, set off for the inshore fishing. In light winds and a heavy swell, her crew supplemented the sails with their oars but could not prevent their boat drifting onto the beach near the old South Breakwater. With his yawl stranded about fifty yards from land, and bumping heavily on the rocks, skipper Andrew Baxter burned several distress flares.

After peering into the darkness for half and hour, the fishermen saw the harbour life-boat pull alongside the forty-five-foot yawl. Although the *Delight* was pounded to bits among the rocks, and was a total loss, she was almost fully insured. (129)

In late November 1897, the harbour life-boat was sent out to the first Aberdeen rescue of a local trawler. At about one o'clock on a Monday morning, in a full north-easterly gale, the trawler *North Pole* went ashore in the channel. The severe strain on her rudder from the following seas had smashed her steering wheel chains as the *North Pole* crossed the bar. As she drifted towards the south side, her skipper set fire to some bedding piled on deck, in an effort to attract attention. Distress flares do not seem to have been part of a boat's standard equipment yet. From the North Pier, the Captain Pilot and some of his watchmen spotted the 23-ton trawler and fired off rockets to muster the rocket and life-boat crews. The leading lights keeper and his team fired two lines across the trawler, but her eight-man crew preferred to wait for the life-boat rather than risk a soaking in the channel. The life-boatmen three times tried to row down channel to the *North Pole*, which was stranded halfway between the old South Breakwater and Poddie's Jetty. The huge seas made it impossible to row beyond the Lower Jetty. Finally, a hawser was rigged from the life-boat to the pier and the spectators on the north side hauled the life-boat down the channel. Opposite the stranded trawler, the life-boatmen cast off and headed across the channel. Heavy seas, high winds and shallow water all combined to make the life-boat's approach difficult. Once in position, the life-boat took aboard the trawlermen without mishap. The *North Pole* subsequently broke up, but not before her thirty boxes of fish, her fishing gear, the crew's bedding and the cooking utensils were taken ashore. (130)

By the beginning of the 20th century, the beach life-boat was also being called out for trawler rescues. In late November 1900, the Grimsby trawler *Guillemot* went ashore on almost the same spot as the schooner *Welcome Home* — among the boulders and stones just south of the life-boathouse. Although the water was broken, the sea was not exceptionally high. But those on shore feared the trawler would have her bottom torn open by the rocks. The men, women and even young people of Fittie turned out to help launch the beach life-boat. As usual, the Fittie women waded into the sea as readily as the men, in helping to get the life-boat launched. Under Coxswain Alexander Meres, the life-boat was rowed out to the *Guillemot*, which was stranded bow-on to the shore. When they got within hailing distance, the life-boatmen were told the trawler's crew would not leave the vessel, even though the waves occasionally broke over the stern and washed along the

deck. The life-boat was pulled back to shore and hauled up on the beach, where it lay out in the open in case it was needed later. At daybreak, two tugs went out to the *Guillemot* and towed her off. The life-boat was not needed.The trawler's skipper had been into Aberdeen harbour several times before. This time he mistook the electric lights at the dockyard and the 'North Boats' wharf for the leading lights at Torry. Steering off course, he took his vessel down behind the North Pier instead of up the channel. (131)

The next steamer to come ashore on Aberdeen beach was a steam liner. At 93 registered tons, the *Metis* was a great-line fishing boat, not a monarch of the oceans. Just two days before Christmas 1901, the Leith tug *Empress of India* towed the *Metis* out of Aberdeen harbour, bound for her new owners in Hull. Off Montrose, the stiff wind that had sprung up made it impossible to continue towing south. The tug captain headed back for Aberdeen in the face of the storm. When the tug and her tow appeared off Aberdeen at seven p.m., the south-easterly wind was blowing very hard. There were the added difficulties of heavy rain, high seas offshore and a nasty ground swell closer to land. In these conditions, the hawser between tug and liner parted and the tug captain had to go alongside the *Metis* and rig up a tow rope. Drifting too far to the north, the tug and her tow were caught among the breakers off the Links' Battery. Then the towing rope broke. With a skeleton crew of three Aberdeen men aboard, the liner began drifting ashore.

The beach life-boat had been got out when the tow broke the second time. There was no shortage of helpers to haul the carriage along the beach, keeping pace with the drifting *Metis*. With a powerful wind at their backs, the Fittie people had little difficulty pulling the carriage northwards. When the *Metis* touched ground on an outer bank of sand just north of the Bathing Station, the carriage was wheeled to the right and run into the water. Dozens of men then waded out, up to their waists in what must have been freezing water. From the surf, they hauled on the ropes which launched the life-boat off the carriage. Manned and launched, the life-boat caught the wind on her starboard side and was blown too far to the north before she got out as far as the *Metis*. Her crew pulled her ashore and the large crowd which had gathered hauled her back onto the carriage. The crowd now hauled the carriage to the south, into the teeth of the gale, until they got it downwind of the stranded liner. The life-boat coxswain thoughtfully estimated where he should have the boat launched, so that she could reach the liner this time. The life-boat then beat out against a sea that was hitting her broadside on, until she got under the bow of the ship. Two men leapt onto the life-boat immediately. Before the captain could do

so, the rescue boat was snatched away by a wave. When the life-boat got close enough again, Captain Scorgie jumped into the sea and was then pulled aboard the *Bon Accord I*. The life-boat turned for the beach and landed the three fishermen. This was Captain Scorgie's third shipwreck. He was full of praise for the life-boatmen and added that Aberdeen was the best place he knew for the people turning out in large numbers to help launch the life-boat. (132)

Just a year later, the harbour life-boat was taken out to the Aberdeen trawler *Strathleven*, which struck the North Pier and stuck fast on the rocks jutting out from the foundations. Conditions on 2nd December 1902 were as bad as they could be for a vessel planning to enter Aberdeen harbour. A four-day-long, south-easterly gale was blowing at its height, with intense cold and hard-driven showers of rain and sleet. 'Far out to sea nothing met the eye but long, swift, racing, white-crested breakers ..... With the strong swell running up the channel and the rush of water from the river, the entrance was lashed into a state of fury ..... No vessel could have attempted to cross the bar at a more inopportune time', when the *Strathleven* mde for the harbour at 5.30a.m. (133) The *Strathleven* was reckoned one of the best of the *Strath* class of Aberdeen trawlers and was heading for Aberdeen fish market after an eight-day trip on which her crew had caught two hundred boxes of fish. The last three days, she had been punching through a gale.

As the *Strathleven* cleared the bar she was carefully watched by the life-boat crew, who had stood by their boat in readiness all day. Just inside the pierheads the trawler was flung back north-eastwards and struck the North Pier abreast the flaghouse at its tip. As she struck the pier, the *Strathleven*'s mate leapt safely onto the pier. She then grounded on the rocks of the pier's foundations, where her plates burst open and a large hole was torn in her bottom. The skipper forbad any of the crew to follow the mate. Before they could do so the trawler was carried further up-channel by a wave which dumped her on the North Pier's under-shoeing just a hundred yards short of Abercromby Jetty. The tug *John Maconachie* went to the rescue, but could not tow the trawler off because of the low tide and could not take the trawlermen off because the tug could not venture too near the lurching vessel. As the trawler bucked wildly from side to side in the heaving swell, the life-boat pulled up to her. The trawler gave a lurch, tilted to port and badly damaged the gunwales of the life-boat. The life-boatmen persevered with their rescue attempt and got the eight men off the *Strathleven* without further incident. The trawler was relieved of its boxed fish next day and the crew got their bedding off.

By 1903, Aberdeen's two-boat service had been in operation almost

thirty years. In all that time, the beach and harbour life-boats had only occasionally been out simultaneously. They had never worked together at a rescue. If both boats were standing by for an emergency, the only regular crew took out one boat and a scratch crew from the inexhaustable stock of volunteers manned the other. The scratch crew would be commanded by the second coxswain from the regular service. It is worth noting that the beach life-boat, although it was far older, was used just as often as the new one. Wrecks at Aberdeen still occurred as frequently at the beach as they did around the harbour entrance. In the period 1875 to 1902, the older boat went out on almost twice as many rescue missions as its companion in the harbour. On its missions, the beach boat was still primarily concerned with wooden sailing vessels until around 1900. On the other hand, after 1890 the harbour life-boat was called out to fishing boats, drifters and trawlers in difficulties about the harbour entrance. The outstanding Aberdeen life-boatman in the last quarter of the 19th century was Coxswain Alexander Fordyce Paterson, 'Dycie'. Born in 1835, 'Dycie' joined the life-boat crew in 1857, when he was twenty two years old. In 1864 he was made second coxswain and in 1869, aged thirty four, became coxswain. In his late fifties, he still went out in command of the boat on every rescue. His name figured in all the press reports of rescue missions. The last mission at which his presence is accurately recorded was the beach life-boat's dangerous trip to Belhelvie in December 1893, to help the crew of the stranded Russian schooner *Ernest Alfred.* 'Dycie' died sometime in 1894-95, aged about sixty.

After 1891 the harbour life-boat was easily launched. It was simply lowered into the water by the hoisting gear in the life-boathouse. The launching of the beach boat was always an ordeal. Men, women and youngsters had to haul it along the beach to whatever launching point took it nearest the stranded vessel. The boat and carriage had then to be pushed and pulled into the sea. Thirty to forty men went out beyond the carriage, up to their waists in icy water, and hauled the boat off the carriage into the sea. (134) Those who helped haul the carriage and launch the boat were paid between one and two shillings for their services. The money was paid out by cheque at the Round House. Questioned in 1980, one Fittie woman recalls that there was no problem deciding who should be paid this small fee. Everyone at Fittie knew everyone else, so there was no possibility of false claims or mistaken payments. An anonymous letter writer in 1974, on the other hand, distinctly remembers that there 'was always a row about the shilling payments.' (135) Though the unknown scribe probably exaggerates the regularity of these arguments, those readers born and brought up in a small community can well imagine there would sometimes have been rows. Neighbourliness and nosiness go together

CHAPTER 5
THE LAST TWENTY YEARS OF THE LOCAL SERVICE

Over the period 1904 to 1924, the two Aberdeen life-boats were mostly taken up with rescue missions to stricken trawlers. This is a reflection of how large and significant Aberdeen's trawling fleet had become by the first decades of the 20th century. There were occasional maverick emergencies for the life-boats to deal with — a large American steamer or a helpless Norwegian three-master — but on the whole they attended to trawlers with a depressing monotony. Remarkably, in this period the relationship between the beach and harbour life-boats altered. In the last twenty years of the local life-saving service it was the harbour life-boat which attended twice as many rescues as the beach boat. The promptness with which many of these missions were mounted underlines the unappreciated benefits which Aberdeen harbour gained from the Fittie pilots' near monopoly of life-boat service. In the early 1900's there were four pilot boats at Aberdeen harbour, manned by twenty four pilots and assistant pilots. A dozen of these men — half of them — provided the Aberdeen life-boat crew. In their full-time occupation, the pilots were determinedly independent. Compared with their fisher neighbours at Fittie, they were aristocrats of labour. They were licensed by the Aberdeen Harbour Board after an annual examination, but were self-employed. Their income depended on the fees they charged for taking vessels safely up-channel into Aberdeen harbour. Wiry or powerfully built, they must have been very strong oarsmen, as they rowed their own pilot boats up and down the channel, in and out the harbour mouth.

When the Aberdeen trawler *Campagnia* sank in the channel early on 9th February 1904, the speed with which her crew were taken off by the life-boat testifies to the foresight, skilled judgement and initiative which an experienced boatman was capable of. In a south-easterly gale, the 192-ton *Campagnia* had arrived off Aberdeen on Monday night to find the green lights exhibited at the harbour mouth, indicating that it was dangerous to enter. Early on Tuesday morning, as the storm abated a little, she was given the red light to enter. Skipper Normandale ignored the red lights and stayed off shore. Unaccountably, when the red lights were extinguished again, about seven a.m., he made for the harbour entrance. The *Campagnia* was caught by two heavy waves as she entered harbour. The first heavy sea drove her into the broken water where the fresh and the sea met, just inside the South Breakwater. Pilot Alexander Meres, the coxswain of the life-boat, had been watching the trawler's approach. Whenever the first

heavy wave forced her into the broken water, he was immediately aware of the danger she was in. He called out the life-boat crew and within minutes the harbour life-boat was being pulled down-channel to the *Campagnia*. By this time the trawler, which had already lost steerage in the cross currents, had been hit by a second, heavy wave. It dashed her head-on against the North Pier. Her bows were completely smashed and the trawler began taking in water quickly. Down at the head, she drifted up-channel until she was one hundred and fifty yards east of the Round House. Her boilers burst as she sank and her nine crewmen clambered into the rigging. By this time, the life-boatmen were close enough to hear the explosion in the boiler room. They came alongside as the trawler's decks went under water. The nine men scrambled into the life-boat, which had only pulled a hundred yards back from the *Campagnia* when the trawler slid out of sight, leaving only the tops of her masts visible in the centre of the fairway. Three of the crew were slightly injured when she struck the North Pier. But for Coxswain Meres' acuteness, the whole crew's condition might have been much worse. (136)

The wreck of the *Campagnia* had a further unhappy consequence. A whole month after she sank in mid-channel, her hull and superstructure still presented a danger to vessels entering Aberdeen harbour. About six a.m. on 7th March, the trawler *George Grimmer* ran up against the sunken wreck and stuck fast on her bulwarks. The *George Grimmer* then tilted badly to her port side and seemed in danger of turning over. The life-boat went down to her but the trawler's crew refused to be taken off. Two tugs pulled at the *George Grimmer* with hawsers, while two hundred men on the pier hauled on a rope and the trawler's steam winch was also set to pulling. The combined efforts of tug, winch and muscle got the trawler unstuck. Little damaged and unaided, she steamed round to the Albert Basin. (137) It is worth noting that the typewritten sheet which lists the life-boat's rescues claims nine lives saved in this accident, whereas the life-boat went out but its services were not called for.

On Guy Fawkes Day, 1905, the weather was squally, with steady rain and gusting winds occasionally blowing to hurricane strength. In the mid-afternoon, the high seas at the harbour mouth were aggravated by low water. The trawler *Lionel* appeared round the Girdleness at three p.m., returning from a fishing trip with thirty to forty boxes of fish. The gale had forced her skipper to cut the trip short. As the *Lionel* encountered the heavy swell at the harbour bar, there were three men at her wheel. Just outwith the pierheads, a heavy wave from astern struck her and damaged her rudder. The trawler no longer answered to the helm and was carried right across the harbour mouth by a big

wave, which almost bent her around the point of the North Pier. She narrowly missed the pierhead, before she was driven behind it and along the face of the beach, a couple of hundred yards offshore. Whenever they saw the North Shields trawlermen lose control of their vessel, the life-boatmen had run to the shed at North Square and encouraged their many willing helpers to haul the carriage three hundred yards north of the shed. With south-easterly winds driving the *Lionel* rapidly towards the sands, the beach life-boat was launched 'and was being pulled through the surf by her crew when the trawler grounded.' (138) It took the life-boatmen another seven minutes of 'wraxing' and pulling before they got near the trawler. They then threw a line to the fishermen, who made it fast. Using this line, the life-boat crew hauled their boat towards the trawler's forecastle, where the men were huddled. The trawlermen leapt into the life-boat one by one and were rowed shorewards. Coxswain Meres had again reacted very quickly when he first saw the trawler in danger and the life-boat landed the eight-man crew of the *Lionel* only twenty minutes after the vessel stranded.

Only two days before Hogmanay that same year, 1905, the local trawler *Caithnesshire* got stuck fast on the rocks close to the North Pier. It was 9.15p.m. on a Friday. The tide was at its very lowest, but Skipper Rasmussen was hurrying to make the last market of the old year. In his eagerness, he rashly got his command stuck on the bottom. From his name, he may have been one of Aberdeen's 'English colony'. This comprised the trawl skippers, mates and deckhands whose skills were imported to Aberdeen from North Shields and Scarborough as the number of steam trawlers inAberdeen increased from tens to hundreds. If the skipper was keen to catch the market, his crew were just as keen to get ashore for the celebrations. The Aberdeen trawler fleet more or less ignored Christmas, but most of it was tied up in harbour over the New Year. When his vessel hit the rocks only fifty yards inside the pierheads, Rasmussen tried to back her astern. Instead, she swung round and stuck fast. The life-boat took off the crew but the skipper and mate refused to leave. With the tide so low, the tugs *John Maconachie* and *Fairweather* could not move the *Caithnesshire*. When high tide came at one a.m. on Saturday 30th December, the trawler was towed off. Badly holed, she was towed to the fish market, discharged her catch and was put on the pontoon dock for repairs. (139) Low water also caused the next difficulty for a trawler at Aberdeen. On 11th September 1908, the tide at Aberdeen was exceptionally low. For three hours, from five a.m. to eight a.m., almost all the vessels in the Albert Basin, the outer harbour and at Footdee were firmly aground. As she came up-channel about eight o'clock, the local trawler *Loch Laggan* broke her steering gear, drifted south and fixed on the bottom near the

old South Breakwater. When the trawler tilted over, the harbour life-boat was got out. But her services were not needed, as the trawlermen refused to abandon ship. As the tide flowed in again, two tugs pulled the *Loch Laggan* afloat and round to the fish market to discharge. (140) The typewritten sheet claims nine lives saved by the life-boat in this incident. Perhaps its author was confusing casualties with rescues.

On 29th December 1908, three years to the day when the *Caithness-hire* stuck fast, an unidentified vessel went ashore in the channel. The life-boatmen were called out to save the crew, in what must have been the most wintry conditions for any of their rescues. The stricken vessel had run hard aground between the new and the old South Break-waters, at about four o'clock in the morning. The weather was 'thick', with a heavy blizzard blowing. For the look-outs on shore, the only indication they had of a vessel ashore was the occasional blowing of her siren — a dull, mournful cry across the water. When the news of a ship aground reached the Keeper of the Leading Lights at Torry, he and his rocket brigade set off for the spot. In blinding drifts of snow they could hardly see where they were going and were up to their waists in the snow. When they did reach the shore opposite the still-unidentified vessel, they could not get their apparatus to work in the scything winds. Seeing that all their efforts at rocket-firing were use-

Quarterly life-line practice at Aberdeen beach, using rocket-firing equipment, c.1900-10. (photo courtesy of Andrew Cluer, Lantern Books, Albert Street)

less, their leader telephoned Assistant Captain Pilot Wyness, who ordered out the harbour life-boat. In the bitter cold, messengers were sent round the Footdee squares crying 'Ship ashore'. Before they could get to the life-boat shed, the members of the crew had to burst their way through the deep snow banked up before their own front doors.

If conditions on land were discouraging, at sea they were just as bad. The heavy swell in the channel prevented the life-boatmen using their oars to any great effect. The tug *Granite City* had to tow the *Bon Accord II* down-channel. With a thick curtain of flakes still blowing from a snow-filled sky, the life-boatmen could see nothing of the distressed trawler. One of the life-boat's crew insisted he 'could not see his finger in front of him.' (141) When they reckoned they were close to the stranded vessel's position, the tug and life-boat parted company and the life-boatmen pulled close enough to the south side to pick up the trawler's outline. Hailed by their would-be rescuers, the trawlermen refused to be taken off. The life-boatmen then pulled their craft astern into mid-channel, for fear of drifting onto the boulders mining the shoreline. For the next hour, the tugmen and life-boatmen anxiously tried to locate each other. The Fittie folk were convinced that the pilots were lost. The tug steamed up and down the channel between the Lower Jetty and the South Breakwater, trying to pick up the life-boat. The *Bon-Accord II* was caught in mid-channel by strong gusts of wind and pressed hard against the North Pier. Only when the wind veered to the south-west were the ten oarsmen able to pull their boat away from the rocks off the pier and out towards mid-channel again. Halfway there, the light which hung at the life-boat's stern post caught the eye of a tugman. The *Granite City* resumed her tow an hour after she had dropped it.

But for the tug, the life-boat and her crew would eventually have been washed onto the rocks at the North Pier. If the boat had been smashed and the crew thrown onto the winter seas, most likely the blizzard and the swell would have prevented any of the twelve men being saved. They would have drowned for nothing, moreover, as the trawlermen had refused their services. When daybreak came, the grounded vessel was identified as the Aberdeen trawler *Swallow*. In the forenoon, as the tide went out, she was left high and dry. The crew scrambled ashore and made for their houses. Their matter-of-fact attitude to the danger they had been in perhaps suggests how hard the life of a trawlerman was. As for the life-boat crew, their loss of contact and control for about an hour emphasised the need for a modern, motor life-boat at Aberdeen, in place of the pulling boats. The R.N.L.I. was beginning to replace its small, oar and sail-driven boats with engined, screw-driven fifty footers. When he reported the life-boat's

mission to the *Swallow*, the local reporter recommended the need for a 'motive-power propelled life-boat at Aberdeen.' He was keenly aware that the R.N.L.I. had recently ordered two motor life-boats for Orkney and that they were to be seen in Aberdeen in January 1908, on the way north to their new stations.

The next trawler rescue at Aberdeen was a straightforward affair, although that can never be foreseen at the time. The twenty-year-old North Shields trawler *William Osten*, only recently purchased by a Torry butcher called Mr Moon, went ashore on the Torry side. The trawler had only been two days at the nearer fishing grounds when a northerly gale forced her back into port. As she crossed the harbour bar, a heavy sea broke the *William Osten*'s steering gear. Altogether helpless, the trawler was quickly driven onto the rocks between the two breakwaters. As her stern struck the rocks and she heaved over to the port side, it seemed as if the trawler would capsize. But the counteracting motion of the sea forced her back upright, at the same time as it washed her further ashore. Coxswain Meres and his crew pulled the harbour life-boat down the channel and took the trawlermen off. The tug *William Findlay* tried to tow off the vessel, but it refused to budge and the hawser finally broke. Her hull full of water and riddled with holes, the old iron screw trawler was a total wreck. Mr Moon had a poor return for his investment. (142)

In January 1912, after a period of seven years in which she had been involved with nothing more perilous than a quarterly practice mission, the beach life-boat was called out twice in as many days. She went out in what proved 'the most disastrous gale for a generation' on the north-east coast of Scotland. On Saturday evening, 13th January, the Aberdeen steamer *Argosy* left London with a cargo of cement, bound for her home port. The 406-ton coaster, launched in 1905, traded regularly between Aberdeen and London for her owners, Messrs. George Elsmie and Son, coal merchants, Aberdeen. When the *Argosy* left London at 7.50p.m. that Saturday, she should have taken fifty-four hours to reach Aberdeen. This time she took twenty-four hours longer than that and arrived in Aberdeen bay early on Wednesday morning in the middle of a hurricane-force wind. With the tide too low for her to enter harbour, she heaved to in the bay and rode the storm. So massive and hard-driven were the waves that those watching from the shore were treated to one of the great spectacles of a North Sea gale — periodically the lighthouse on the South Breakwater would disappear completely beneath a white sheet of water and spray. Getting on for 11a.m., as the tide rose, the *Argosy*'s captain decided to dash for the harbour. As the steamer made for the entrance, her troubles began. She found difficulty in making headway through the heavy seas and

was taking in water.

Difficulty became impossibility when the *Argosy*'s steam-powered steering gear broke. The engineers rigged up hand-steering gear in its place, but this was not powerful enough to keep her on course for the harbour. For half an hour the hand-steering did keep the *Argosy* off the beach. Down below, the coal bunkers were flooded and the stokers and engineers stood in the water by their posts, keeping up steam in the boilers. On the bridge, the captain, seamen and cook took turns at the makeshift steering gear. By 11.30a.m. the steamer had drifted westwards until she was opposite the Bathing Station and only 200-300 yards offshore. The captain tried to get his vessel's bow pointed out to sea again and did manage to swing it round from south-west to facing south. But the *Argosy* was caught by the broken seas she had drifted into. A wave struck her broadside on, swinging her round until another wave drove her aground. The steamer grounded and settled at about a quarter to twelve, at a point three hundred yards north of the Bathing Station and one hundred and eighty yards from the shore.

The captain and his eight crew-men did not think their plight was serious enough to merit rescue by the life-boat. They sent off no distress signals and considered making for shore in their own small boat. They did reconsider, however, and finally sent up flares. When the distress flares were seen from the shore, the beach life-boat was got out and pulled along the sands by literally hundreds of people. A crowd reckoned at about two thousand gathered in less than ten minutes and watched from the promenade, the links and the beach. About a hundred yards to windward of the wreck, the life-boat was launched. In just three minutes, the life-boatmen had pulled a distance of three hundred yards or so to the grounded steamer and got round on her leeward side. The three youngest members of the stranded vessel's crew jumped into the life-boat first and were closely followed by the older men. The coxswain turned his boat's bow back towards the beach and reached it in two minutes. 'The rescue work from the time the life-boat was taken from its shed until the crew of the *Argosy* were landed occupied exactly eight minutes.' (143) That short span of time gives no suggestion of the danger her crew were in. As rescuers and rescued rowed back to shore, a large breaker caught the life-boat and lifted her high in the air. Fortunately, the boat gathered and righted itself. With the steamer's crew all safely ashore, there were still two casualties that day. As the life-boat was being launched, a young helper slipped, fell among the surf and was dragged into the sea by the back wash. He was pulled, soaking, from the water. After the rescue, a retired life-boatman who had helped at the launching was hurrying home to Fittie when he suffered a heart attack and died. In his seven-

ties and overweight, Andrew Main's eagerness to attend a launching was greater than his fitness for the job. His by-name, 'Excitement', suggests that he should have taken things easier than he did.

The gale was still blowing the following evening as the Peterhead trawler *Eclipse* made for Aberdeen harbour. (144) Owned by the Peterhead Trawling Company, the *Eclipse* was returning from a three-week fishing trip in Icelandic waters. In the darkness, only the trawler's lights showed her course as she entered Aberdeen bay around six p.m. and dodged the storm for the next three hours. Around nine o'clock, the trawler was hit by several tremendous seas, which swept away the wheelhouse, the telegraphic apparatus connecting the bridge with the engine room, and many of the deck fittings. Much of the superstructure of these early 20th-century trawlers was rather frail. Until relatively recently the men on the bridge had only been protected by a flimsy canvas dodger. Another large sea almost washed the skipper and mate overboard. Badly weakened in her contest with the waves, the *Eclipse* was in no condition to continue dodging. Skipper Michael Stanley made a dash for Aberdeen harbour around 9.30 p.m. The crippled trawler twice tried to cross the harbour bar. The first time, she was tossed right round the North Pier and into the broken water behind it. At her second attempt, the trawler was badly hit by more heavy seas. She was swept northwards, barely under control. The skipper and mate bravely stuck to the wheel, even though the bridge was open to all the elements and they were in constant danger of being washed away. The engineers stayed below at their engines. The fore and aft compartments and the crew's cabin were all flooded and tons of water were pouring in off the deck.

When the *Eclipse* missed the harbour entrance for the second time, and was driven across the bay three hundred yards offshore, Coxswain Meres in the Captain Pilot's Office at the North Pier realised that the life-boat's services might be needed. He called out the crew. From in front of the shed at North Square, the life-boatmen followed the trawler's path by tracking the demented tossing of her lights. Skipper Stanley still had his vessel barely under control, but by the time she was opposite the Bathing Station he had begun to burn flares as a sign that she was in danger. Once among the broken water nearer the shore, the trawler was driven steadily closer to land; until she grounded about a quarter mile south of the Donmouth and a hundred and fifty yards from shore. Forty minutes had passed since she first failed to make the harbour entrance. The fact that her crew had survived that long was a credit to the skipper's bravery and seamanship, which had prevented the trawler being swamped altogether. The distressed trawlermen began to burn flares continuously and the life-boatmen

took this as their signal to call for help in hauling the boat north. With hundreds helping and a crowd reckoned in thousands watching, the life-boat, its carriage and crew set off north along the beach from Footdee. From the opposite end of the beach, the coastguards at the Don Station got out their rocket apparatus and hauled it southwards. The coastguards were opposite the *Eclipse* first but were unable to fire off their rockets because the life-boat soon reached a suitable launching point and was pulled out into the surf. The life-boat was in the rocket crew's line of fire and ran the risk of entangling with the life-line.

The passage to the grounded trawler proved a very dangerous one for the *Bon Accord I*, although accounts differ about the exact circumstances of the life-boatmen's peril. A local journalist reported that the life-boatmen had a hard pull out from the shore and were three-quarters of the way to the *Eclipse* when the life-boat practically came to a standstill. Several of the oars had been lost and one had snapped under the strain of the heavy seas. The Captain Pilot's version was that the life-boat actually reached the trawler, which had not yet grounded. The life-boatmen made fast to her, when a large wave lashed over the *Eclipse*. This wave snapped the connecting rope and washed away the life-boatmen's oars. This was far from being a minor accident. The men in the life-boat were left with little control over their boat. The different versions of exactly how the oars were lost are another example of confusion among spectators and participants about the actual course of events at a shipwreck.

Whatever the case, the life-boat crew stayed calm and lucky. Without causing further damage, the wind and waves pushed their boat the hundred yards or so back to shore. With the life-boatmen out of the way, the coastguards fired off three rockets at the *Eclipse*. The first fell twenty yards short; the second soared high and true but the life-line just scraped the stern of the trawler; the third rocket was caught by a squall and veered away, as useless as the first two. By now, life-boatmen and spectators had splashed and waded through the surf, recovering the oars which had been washed ashore. With a full set of ten oars, the life-boatmen rowed back out to the trawler. They again had a rough passage, as the five thousand spectators on shore could see for themselves. In the darkness, the life-boat's stern lamp could be seen tossing and dancing about like a demented fire-fly. In the rough seas, the life-boatmen needed four minutes to row to the *Eclipse* The seas in the lee of the trawler were still powerful enough to pull the life-boat away from her several times. But each time the rescue boat and the stricken vessel came together some of the trawlermen quickly transferred. The transfer took a few minutes. Another three minutes and the nine men, a boy and a Scots terrier dog had been rowed safely

ashore. The life-boatmen had handled their unaccustomed boat skilfully in a difficult, nerve-wracked rescue.

There were more vicious January gales at Aberdeen a year later. Those in 1913 approached hurricane-force and were almost as wild as the previous year's storms. The Aberdeen trawler *Braconhill*, belonging to the Don Fishing Company, was making for Aberdeen on 9th January in a south-easterly gale. As she approached the entrance channel about noon, her steering gear snapped and she came to a standstill. As the south-easterly blast caught her up, the skipper ordered full steam ahead. Under full power she made way for only two minutes, before it was clear that her skipper's efforts to bring the *Braconhill* directly up the channel were useless. Repeated gusts of wind drove the trawler towards the stonework of the pierhead. She was plunging so crazily in the massive swell that long sections of her keel were quite clear of the water sometimes. Five minutes after her steering snapped, she was thrown forcibly against the North Pier, torn back out into the channel, then thrown back against the stonework. The trawler toppled on her side and the crew scrambled into the rigging. The life-saving brigade was quickly on the spot, fastened ropes between the *Braconhill*'s mast and the pier and slid a buoy across to the fishermen. The crew's passage ashore was a dangerous one. The

The wreck of the steam trawler 'Braconhill', after she struck the North Pier on 19 January 1913.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept.)

seas swelled and sank, bubbled and frothed in the narrow gap between trawler and pier. It took three-quarters of an hour to get all the crew onto the pier. The life-boat arrived as they were being pulled across one by one. It stood by but its services were not needed. The *Braconhill* was badly holed from grinding against the pier and became a total wreck. (145)

Eight days later the *Bon Accord II* was towed out across the bar by a steam tug,when the Hull trawler *Pamela* went firmly aground a little to the north of the Bathing Station. The *Pamela* had been passing through the Pentland Firth, returning to Hull from an Icelandic fishing trip, when one of her lower plates burst open in a gale. As water found its way between the severed rivets, the trawl skipper made full speed for Aberdeen. Out in Aberdeen bay early on 17th January the *Pamela*'s skipper mistook some bright lights in the King Street area for the harbour leading lights. He steered for them and found himself among the breakers off the beach. Before he could get his vessel astern, she was embedded firmly in the sand. The trawler's peculiar and dangerous course had been noticed from the North Pier and the life-boat crew summoned. The life-boat and tug were on their way across the stormy bar before the *Pamela* had even grounded. The Don coastguards were as watchful and as quick to react. Their rocket apparatus, on its cart, was yoked to two horses and pulled along the narrow strip of beach left by the high tide. In pitch darkness, and with stormy breakers smashing down on the *Pamela*'s stern, the life-boat got alongside. Three members of the trawler's crew came off. The remainder could not be persuaded to come aboard the life-boat. The life-boatmen pulled away out of danger, while the rocket brigade put a line aboard the trawler. After standing by for most of the night, the coastguards dismantled their apparatus and took it away. Later in the morning, empty fish boxes were taken down the beach to the *Pamela*, which was high and dry by then. Her fish were carted away to market. (146)

The missions to the *Braconhill* and the *Pamela* were the last rescues by the Aberdeen life-saving service before the First World War broke out in August 1914. For many R.N.L.I. stations the war years were busy ones. A number of Institution medals were won as life-boats went out to cargo vessels which got into difficulty while carrying war materials up and down the British coast. But the war years 1914-18 were quiet ones for the Aberdeen life-boats. Before and during the war, however, there were hints that the city's life-saving service was relapsing below standard. Some sections of it were losing that predictable efficiency which should be taken for granted in any rescue service.

Between the wreck of the *Braconhill* and the stranding of the *Pamela*, a Danish steamer, *G. Koch*, had been wrecked at Girdleness on

11th January. The Torry life-saving apparatus was called out, along with the Cove and Donmouth brigades. Early on Sunday morning, a fierce four-day-long gale culminated in a heavy blizzard. With snow and spindrift slashing along the shore-line, and people on land barely able to stand up in the wind, the 1,159-ton steamer was dashed onto the Girdleness rocks just south of Aberdeen harbour entrance. On shore, three life-saving brigades got to within a hundred yards of the hulk, which went to pieces in less than an hour. Nineteen men were aboard the vessel, but the rocket crews' best efforts to get them off were frustrated. After several hawsers were rigged up between ship and shore, the fore-end of the steamer broke up. The *G. Koch*'s cargo of pit props, and its deck fittings, were washed into the sea. Forty foot waves dashed this flotsam about like pulping hammers, against the ship itself and in the water between it and the shore. No seaman could pass ashore on a cradle which dipped into the sea and was liable to be pounded by such lethal wreckage. Rescue from on shore was impossible meantime. Four men did get safely ashore by clambering hand-over-hand along one tight hawser. The others huddled on board until the gale moderated with daylight and the tide went back. Seven men had drowned during the night. (147) After the loss of these Danish seamen, while the rocket crews stood by helplessly all night, the efficiency of the Torry life-saving apparatus was questioned. A sub-committee of the Harbour Commissioners reported that the apparatus was in complete working order and had been properly employed. No blame could attach to the Torry brigade for unavoidable circumstances which made a rescue impossible. Yet, implicit in the sub-committee's recommendations, was a belief that the rocket crews could operate more efficiently. Reorganisation; revision of the regulations; proper means of letting brigade members know there was an alarm; the installation of a telephone between Torry Rocket Brigade House beside Greyhope Road and the home of the Keeper of the Leading Lights; these were the recommended improvements. Reading between the lines, the full Torry brigade seems to have been slow in turning out. (148)

This slow turn-out was repeated four years later, when the Aberdeen trawler *North Star* stranded on the south side in February 1918. Her skipper wrote a letter to the Harbour Commissioners, complaining that his boat had been wrecked at nine o'clock on the morning of the 28th, but he and his crew had to wait two hours before they were landed. There were only three rockets available for firing. Skipper John Cormack reckoned he was lucky to have been stranded only a hundred yards off shore. It was a 'disgrace to the port' to be so poorly provided with life-saving equipment and so tardy in using it. (149)

These two incidents of 1913 and 1918 did not promise well for the post-war period. The two Aberdeen life-boats were still good, seaworthy craft, but they were ageing and rapidly becoming outdated. The beach life-boat was sixty years old in 1913, while the harbour life-boat was forty years old in 1915. Both were traditional, pulling life-boats, without even masts or sails. Even before the First World War, the R.N.L.I. had stationed an engined, motor life-boat at Peterhead.

Post-war rescue work was resumed at Aberdeen in March 1919, when seven men were hauled ashore on life-lines from the *Steenwjkerdiepi*, which had run aground on the beach. The life-boats resumed their missions in February 1920, when the Aberdeen trawler *Morven* went ashore near the old South Breakwater. Shortly after the trawler hit bottom at eight p.m. on the 19th February, the harbour life-boat went to the crew's assistance. The trawlermen were confident they could float their boat off with the rising tide and declined the life-boatmen's offer. Instead, the tide took the *Morven* further ashore and the tug *Granite City* could not get close enough to connect a towing rope. At one a.m., the trawlermen signalled for assistance and the life-boat crew pulled down-channel again. The life-boat could not get alongside a trawler so far ashore and the life-boatmen abandoned their rescue efforts. The Torry rocket brigade arrived and put their first rocket across the *Morven* amidships. In the guttering light of flares, the trawlermen were pulled ashore by breeches buoy.

Less than a month later, Aberdonians were given their last look at a large, working, sailing vessel in distress. The full-rigged Norwegian ship *Audny*, en route from South America to Denmark with a cargo of grain, had taken sixty days or so to cross the Atlantic from Buenos Aires to the Orkneys. In the last fourteen days she had hit a succession of storms and hurricanes. Her deck engines, her winches, her gangways, all the deck gear, were washed or blown overboard. The cruel sea's next crippling blow was to tear her sails to ribbons in a storm west of Orkney. At the Norwegian captain's request, an Aberdeen and a Hull trawler took the ship in tow and arrived off Aberdeen two days later, early on Wednesday 10th March. Only two hours after low tide, when the water in the fairway averaged eighteen feet deep, the trawlers and their tow tried to enter harbour. The *Audny* had a draught of twenty two feet. At 6.30 a.m. the sailing ship went aground, swung across the channel and blocked it completely. Masts, bare yards and a tangle of rigging were in sharp relief against the dawn sky in the east. The neck of Aberdeen harbour was tightly corked up. No vessel could leave; only small trawlers could enter. Around mid-day, the bow of the *Audny* collided with the wall of the North Pier and knocked out twenty feet of stonework. Her long jib-boom lay right across the pier — like

The Norwegian sailing ship 'Audny' stuck at Aberdeen Harbour mouth, 10 March 1920. (photo courtesy of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Dept)

a forlorn salute. Four trawlers and two tugs began towing her at two p.m. By 3.30 they had her parallel with the pier and clear of the fairway, but she could not be towed up-channel into the harbour. At 5 p.m. she was tied up alongside the North Pier.

The *Audny*'s owners decided to have her towed to Leith for repairs and on Friday the two salving trawlers hauled her out into Aberdeen bay. She had twenty four men aboard. The captain's wife and two children were left in Aberdeen after the trials of the previous two weeks' storms. A southerly gale prevented the trawlers and their charge leaving the bay. Instead, the wind pressed the *Audny* closer and closer to the beach. About three o'clock in the afternoon, when it seemed the sailing ship could not escape grounding, the harbour life-boat went out over the bar and made two trips to take her twenty four men ashore. In the heavy swell this was not too easy a task. By five o'clock the *Audny* was only two hundred and fifty yards off the beach and the doom-driven vessel seemed fated to go aground at low tide. The salvage tug *Ocean Bride* got a cable aboard her and, with the two trawlers' assistance, managed to tow the derelict half a mile out into the bay. Only when the wind veered round during the night, from south to north-west, was the *Audny* assured of staying afloat. (150)

On its next two missions, the harbour life-boat returned to the routine of distressed trawlers. The Grimsby trawler *Victor* went ashore on the south side of the navigation channel while heading out to sea.

Although it was late July, there was a heavy swell and a stiff breeze. Wind and wave were not to be faulted for the accident. The *Victor*'s skipper had taken her too close to the south side, where she struck at teatime. A tug and a Peterhead drifter were alongside before the life-boat got down-channel and tried to tow the Grimsbymen off. But the trawler's bottom was being torn out and her engine room filled with water in half an hour. The trawl skipper asked the driftermen not to haul the tow rope any more, for fear of pulling the *Victor* into mid-channel where she would sink. He asked that his crew be taken off instead. The Peterhead men took aboard seven of the *Victor*'s crew, while three others swam ashore. The life-boat now arrived and took off the chief engineer. The trawler's skipper and mate would not go ashore at all, 'as there would be no one left in charge'. But the pressing danger that their vessel would break up soon forced them ashore in the breeches buoy. (151) In mid-April 1922, there was another grounding on the south side of the channel. The Aberdeen trawler *Rhone* was coming into harbour at 9.45p.m., only half an hour before low water, when her keel caught the bottom and she stuck fast. The life-boat and a tug stood by in a slight swell while the trawlermen easily launched their small boat and rowed to Torry. (152)

On 1st October 1922, there was a break in the succession of grounded trawlers. The 3,453-ton U.S. steamer *Quaker City*, went ashore on a low reef about a half-mile south of the Scaurs of Cruden. This double-bottomed, cargo and passenger steamer was in no danger, but the precaution was taken of putting out a distress call. Wick radio station, only two years in operation, picked up the signal and relayed the news to Aberdeen. The vessel had struck at 2.40a.m., but the crew remained on board until morning light. With the doubts of a dark night removed, and the moderately heavy sea coming down to a calm, the crew took the two passengers and their own baggage ashore in the ship's life-boat. Aberdeen Post Office had received the news from Wick at five a.m. and at 6.30 the life-boat was towed northwards out of the harbour. Tug and life-boat reached the Scaurs of Cruden two hours later, around 8.30. Along with the Collieston rocket apparatus and the Peterhead life-boat, the Aberdeen boat stood by the *Quaker City* in case the wind veered unexpectedly and dangerously to the east. Their services were never required. (153)

A year later, on 19th October 1923, 'two lives were lost when the Aberdeen trawler *Imperial Prince* ran ashore on the Belhelvie sands ..... Two of the crew were rescued after clinging to the rigging for six hours and the remaining five were brought ashore after being exposed to the elements for thirteen hours.' (154) The 'Aberdeen Journal''s brief summary of a miserable tragedy was the epitaph for

the Aberdeen life-saving service. The deaths of the two young Aberdeen trawlermen at Belhelvie beach surely prefigured the end of Aberdeen's own life-boats. The *Imperial Prince* worked the fishing grounds close to Aberdeen and had left them about midnight on Thursday in order to catch the Friday morning market. The weather was thick, with a heavy sea running and the shore lights obscured by haze. Around six o'clock on Friday morning the *Imperial Prince* struck a shoal a mile north of the Black Dog Rock, five miles from the Bridge of Don. Even at low tide, the shoal was four hundred yards from the shore. A local farmer spotted the trawler's distress flares and warned the Balmedie police, who relayed the news to the Bridge of Don and Belhelvie Coastguard Stations. The coastguards and their life-saving apparatus only reached the sands at 8.30, because the section of coast on which the trawler had stranded was difficult to reach. The strong south-easterly wind was whipping spindrift off the turbulent seas. Only the masts and funnel of the *Imperial Prince* were visible. Nine men could be seen hanging from the rigging. The wind carried away the first rockets that the coastguards fired. The next ones fell true, but the trawlermen could not walk the half-submerged deck of the boat to recover them. The lines fell uselessly between the masts, outwith the men's reach.

About eleven o'clock, five hours after the trawler struck and the men had taken to the rigging, the *Bon Accord II* reached the sands, under tow by the paddle tug *Monarch*. Breaker after breaker marched, clamoured, roared towards the shore — like advancing lines of soldiers in an 18th-century battle. These huge, incessant breakers had the mastery of the life-boat and threw it about as easily as they would a cork. The waves which washed over the trawlermen broke over the life-boat just as contemptuously. The life-boat had gone to sea without a drogue, which would have helped keep her head on to the sea. Consequently, as the rescue craft neared the trawler, she broached in the heavy seas. All four oarsmen on the starboard side were washed overboard. Two of these men, Alex Allan and George Flett, were washed past the stern of the wreck. The life-boat was washed past the trawler's port side and then the crew still on board picked up their colleagues out of the sea. The boat itself was unmanageable, as all the oars had been carried away. By the time the four cork-jacketed souls had been rescued from the breakers, the motion had carried the life-boat a half-mile north of the wreck and driven it ashore. (155) The coastguards started firing rockets again, but the risks of even an accurate strike were soon clear. One life-line fell close to the mast around mid-day. One of the young deck-hands climbed down the rigging to secure it, lost his footing and fell into the sea. He disappeared altog-

ether and was drowned — aged twenty four. Another rocket fell even closer and within easy reach. The line was caught and tied firmly to the mast. But the line was still useless to the trawlermen. Their eyes were so sore from the salt water that they could not read the instructions semaphored from the shore. They had clung to their lurching, precarious perches for over six hours. The battering waves had exhausted them with repeated blows, as well as making it dangerous to move even a foot or two. They were incapable of hauling out the life-saving gear which could help them ashore.

The Newburgh life-boat arrived shortly after one o'clock, as the tide began to ebb. Villagers and a local farmer's horses had pushed and pulled the life-boat carriage five miles along the sands. They had started out at nine a.m. The Newburgh men launched their boat some distance south of the *Imperial Prince*, to take account of the wind and the current. After being repeatedly beaten away from the trawler by the breakers, the exhausted Newburgh life-boatmen managed to claw the hull with an anchor. There was a life-boat secure alongside the *Imperial Prince*, seven hours or so after the trawler went aground. The life-boat fixed a buoy to the rocket line still hanging from the mast and had it pulled in by the mate of the trawler. Three men then made the trial of crossing from the *Imperial Prince* to the Newburgh boat. The second man, a twenty-three-year-old deckhand, slipped from the buoy and was lost. The third was in a serious condition. As he was got across, the line of life between boat and trawler broke away. The life-boat returned to shore with two men. Five trawlermen still hung on, waiting to be rescued. The Newburgh coxswain got together a scratch crew of life-boatmen and volunteers and took the Newburgh boat out again — in vain. 'The futility of further attempts by life-boats propelled by oars was apparent.' (156) The Peterhead motor life-boat was called for about four o'clock.

Before the Peterhead boat got down the coast, a reinforcement of Aberdeen life-boatmen arrived by bus around five o'clock. The Aberdeen life-boat was pulled out again, but the oarsmen could make no headway in the face of the sea. The *Bon-Accord II* was forced past the wreck, to come ashore several hundred yards north of it. Just before six p.m., as darkness came down, a party of navymen from a destroyer berthed in Aberdeen harbour arrived. With fresh help, the rescuers decided to take out the Newburgh life-boat again. Three Newburgh men commanded, with the naval ratings as oarsmen. They pulled straight out to sea, with a directness that revealed their determination to end this epic of futility. When almost level with the *Imperial Prince*, they drifted down on her with the current and threw an anchor aboard her. The life-boat was hauled alongside the mast and the five trawler-

men climbed or fell aboard. The navymen then pulled for shore, taking just quarter of an hour to go out and back again. It was now almost seven p.m. The five trawlermen had held on to the masts and rigging for thirteen hours. The Peterhead life-boat arrived too late to help with the rescue work.

There was no denying the braveness and determination of the Aberdeen life-boatmen involved in the rescue. But it was quite clear to the large crowd who had gathered to watch the long-drawn-out rescue effort, that the pulling life-boat could not operate efficiently in the very heaviest seas. The Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners were treated to a new burst of public indignation about the state of the life-boat service. A week after the *Imperial Prince* came ashore at Belhelvie, a heckling meeting for the town council elections was held in Sunnybank School, St Machar Ward. One heckler insisted that the present life-boats were useless and should be replaced. He remarked: 'The city is spending thousands and hundreds of thousands in various schemes, and a very large sum of money at the harbour in order to take in Canadian cattle. Wouldn't it suit them better to get a motor life-boat, seeing the tragedy that happened at the Black Dog last week? If a half-dozen of the councillors had been hanging to the mast of the wrecked trawler, not only half-a-dozen navymen, but the whole navy would have been called out to save them. It would have taught them a lesson.' (157) The north-easterner reserves some of his most abusive wit for those smug 'coonsillers' whom he elects to office. The anonymous heckler's contempt was applauded by the audience. They probably shared his conviction that the City Fathers' priorities were 'a' wrang' and that they were not concerned for the lives of 'ordinary folk'. Following the First World War, there was still a great deal of resentment of authority. When the meeting's councillor-chairman tried to avoid any responsibility for the matter, the heckler rejoined that the candidates should use their influence to bring about some change and added: 'The present boat isn't fit to carry a ton of rotten apples in besides men.' (157) His abuse and his stubborn reluctance to be led away from the subject were applauded once more. Pinned down by the popular heckler, the smooth-talking chairman had to concede that the Town Council and the Harbour Commissioners had already been discussing the purchase of a new life-boat. They planned to use the legacy left by a woman twenty years previously, to provide another Aberdeen life-boat. The audience was placated by this news.

On 1st November, a fatal accident inquiry was held at Aberdeen into the wreck of the *Imperial Prince*. The jury made several recommendations in their verdict, among them that a motor boat would do away with the heavy labour of the life-boat crew. This recommendation

amounted to a criticism of the existing Aberdeen service and a strong hint that it should be modernised. Faced with this verdict, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners set up a sub-committee to consider and report on 'the whole subject of the life-boat service at this port and the question of its transfer to the R.N.L.I.' (158) The sub-committee met representatives of the R.N.L.I. in mid-February 1924 and discussed the terms for transferring the life-boats from the local authority to the national organisation.

The R.N.L.I. undertook to place two temporary life-boats at Aberdeen, while a new, sixty-foot, motor life-boat was being built and a better beach boat found. This modernised service would cost the Institution £16,000 for the new boat and £450-£500 per year for a full-time mechanic, a part-time assistant mechanic and a part-time coxswain. The maintenance of the motor boat itself would cost a further £400 per year. The cost of replacing the beach boat was £1,000 and its upkeep another £50-£70 per year. In return, the Institution thought the Aberdeen Harbour Board should provide £600 per year towards the cost of the service. The Harbour Commissioners had been spending only £225 per year on their life-boats, taking no account of the cost or need of replacement. The sub-committee of the Commissioners wanted to bargain with the R.N.L.I. and recommended an offer of £300 per year plus boathouse and berthing accommodation. A full meeting of the Harbour Commissioners decided to offer the R.N.L.I. £500, not £300 or £600. The R.N.L.I. accepted this offer of £500 and reminded the Commissioners that the legacy of the late Mrs Elizabeth M. Gow — amounting to £4,000 in 1923 — should presumably come to the Institution, since the bequest was meant for a new life-boat. The Harbour Commissioners agreed to the R.N.L.I.'s stipulation and undertook to transfer the legacy to the Institution's funds. (159) This did not happen until November 1938.

As the Commissioners' sub-committee discussed the transfer of the Aberdeen service to the R.N.L.I., the local life-boat performed one last rescue operation. The beach life-boat, now seventy years old, went out on a rescue for the first time in eleven years. On 7th December 1923, the local trawler *Princess Royal* left Aberdeen harbour, bound for Methil to pick up coal. As she left harbour at five o'clock, in darkness, the sea was wild and a south-easterly gale was driving the rain straight at the wheelhouse panes. The powerful wind caught the trawler, carried her round the north side of the pier and blew her ashore on the beach. Her distress signals alerted the look-out at the Round House and the life-boat crew was called out. Low tide and a series of sand banks caused some delay in getting the beach boat into deep enough water. Once alongside the grounded trawler, the life-boat crew made

fast. But their rope slipped off in a heavy sea and the life-boat was driven away to leeward of the wreck. The Fittie men rowed laboriously back to the wreck, against the wind. This time they got off all the crew except the skipper, who refused to leave. The life-boatmen spent dangerous minutes trying to persuade him to leave, but were forced to give up because their boat had hit hard against the trawler's side and water was coming in through the damaged planks. The life-boat came ashore, after taking a little over an hour to rescue the trawlermen. The vessel was successfully refloated four days later. (160) Now Aberdeen's beach life-boat was not only old, she was also damaged and leaky.

Apart from their harbour life-boat's embarrassing futility at the *Imperial Prince* and the damage to the beach boat by the *Princess Royal*, in 1923-24 what made the Harbour Commissioners decide to hand over their local life-boat service to the R.N.L.I.? The R.N.L.I. was no stranger to the people and the Harbour Commissioners of Aberdeen. The Institution had a voluntary fund-raising committee in the city from the late 19th-century. Relations between the Harbour Commissioners and the R.N.L.I.'s local representatives were friendly and accommodating but never close. In Aberdeen, as in other major seaports, the R.N.L.I. held 'Life-Boat Saturdays' as part of their fund-raising drive. For one of these 'Saturdays', there was a massed band performance in the Duthie Park, with rowing boats placed at the four entrances to serve as collection boxes. (161) At an earlier R.N.L.I. fund-raising, a demonstration of 'aquatic sports' had been put on in the River Dee. The local R.N.L.I. committee persuaded the Harbour Commissioners to lend their two life-boats as the highlight of the procession to the river. When the Harbour Commissioners were asked to supplement their assistance with a donation, they rather sulkily refused. (162) Apart from 'Life-boat Saturdays', the R.N.L.I. collected in the streets and theatres. They collected £4 17/- in His Majesty's Theatre on Hogmanay 1911. (163) Beginning in 1900, the Harbour Commissioners were approached several times by the R.N.L.I. central committee in London, to ask if they would hand over their life-saving equipment to the Institution. Why, then, did they delay another twenty three years before inviting in the R.N.L.I.; meantime holding on to boats that were seventy and fifty years old by 1924?

When the R.N.L.I. first approached the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners in 1900, the question of a transfer was discussed in committee and the Harbour Master's opinion was asked for. Harbour Master Crombie's written report carried enough weight to sway the Commissioners against giving up the local service. Crombie observed that the piloting service at Aberdeen harbour would no longer run smoothly

if the R.N.L.I. took over the life-boats. Under the local service, while half the pilots were on stand-by at the life-boat shed, the other dozen did their work for them. The National Institution would upset this convenient, informal arrangement. Crombie never explained why this should be so. He also seriously doubted that the life-boats would be any better managed by the Institution than they were by the Harbour Board. He reckoned the local service was more adaptable to local circumstances than a centralised national organisation could be. As an instance of local flexibility and initiative, he cited the unsuitability of the R.N.L.I.'s standard life-boat carriage for a sandy beach such as Aberdeen's. The Harbour Commissioners had condemned the Institution's carriage and designed their own one. The R.N.L.I.'s inspectors had admitted that the Aberdeen carriage was superior to their own. Perhaps Crombie's clinching argument was his point that the Harbour Board would still have to bear the cost of maintaining the life-boats when they were taken over by the R.N.L.I. But it was an expense which the Harbour Commissioners could no longer control or keep in check. Some of Crombie's arguments in August 1900 were weak, while others appealed to penny-pinching and local pride. They were acceptable enough to the Harbour Board, whose members decided not to let the R.N.L.I. operate out of Aberdeen. (164)

In February-March 1915 and in September-December 1920, a Harbour Board committee again recommended that 'no advantage would be gained by the transference of the Service to the Life-boat Institution'. On both occasions the Harbour Master's letter of August 1900 was reproduced and its arguments carried the day. When Crombie reproduced his report in 1915 and 1920, he made only minor alterations of detail and none of argument. In 1920, as in 1900, the same arguments were being made in favour of a local service and against the R.N.L.I. This points to a certain conservatism on the Aberdonians' part. (165) The Harbour Commissioners were probably less inclined to switch to motor boats than were the majority of their life-boatmen. It is the case that the life-boat crew had mixed feelings towards their oared boats — some were critical, some not so critical. One of the last coxswains of the local life-boat service was uncertain of the advantages of a self-righting motor life-boat such as the R.N.L.I. would introduce. He always insisted that it would cost a great many life-boatmen's lives. (166) The majority of the Aberdeen crew did certainly favour the replacement of oars by an engine. Around 1920, the Harbour Commissioners do seem to have been considering buying a motor life-boat for the local service and were actively investigating the problems of transition from human to mechanical power. They sent away for information on the dislike shown towards the motor boats by the

life-boatmen at Tynemouth and Broughty Ferry. The Tynemouth and Broughty Ferry men shared the Aberdeen coxswain's reservations about motor boats. At Tynemouth the pilots had refused to man the new motor life-boat. They only reluctantly agreed to take it out after the Royal Engineers were forced to man it temporarily. At Broughty Ferry the crew considered the new life-boat impractical at first and only changed their minds later. (167) In 1920, with these other stations' experiences in mind, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners were still thinking of making the transition form an oared to a motorised life-boat within the confines of a *local* life-boat service. Yet they temporised and made no moves towards buying a motor life-boat. By 1923, however, the Harbour Commissioners had entirely altered their opinion on retaining a local service and were seeking an agreement with the R.N.L.I.

A number of developments persuaded the Commissioners to give up their service. Its upkeep, for one, was becoming more expensive. In 1895 the Harbour Board had stopped levying a life-boat rate, which that year brought in £141 16/3d. After 1895 the funds for the life-boats had to come from general revenue and the Harbour Board's official status prevented it collecting for charity in the streets. Annual maintenance costs escalated dramatically after the First World War. Between 1904 and 1913 the annual average cost of maintaining the life-boats and life-preserving apparatus was £170 19/8d. From 1914—1923 that average annual figure had jumped by almost 50% to £253 8/6d. The figure of £250 was still remarkably cheap, but it was kept down at a cost. The life-boat crew were being paid the same in 1923 as they received in 1875. Moreover, the figures of £170 and £250 carried no provision for the replacement of old, out-dated life-boats. Unfortunately for Aberdeen, the great development in the R.N.L.I.'s post-war life-boat service was to replace cheap pulling boats with costly motor life-boats.

In 1914 the R.N.L.I. had twenty one motor-powered boats in service and another seven on order. The war years repeatedly revealed the advantages of motor-power over sail and oar. Motor boats could operate in wilder storms and higher seas. After the war, the R.N.L.I. pressed ahead with a modernisation programme. By the early 1920's, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners badly needed to replace their old life-boats. To do so they would be obliged to spend £18,000 on a sixty-foot motor life-boat. This emphasis on the motor boat was underlined in late August 1923. That month the R.N.L.I. sent its latest sixty-foot motor life-boat on a round-Britain tour. The *William and Kate Johnston*, with a speed of ten knots, was reckoned 'the most powerful in the world.' She had a hundred and fifty mile radius of

action and could hold one hundred and fifty people. As standard equipment, she carried a life-line gun, a safety net and a searchlight. The Institution's object in sending her round Britain, calling in at important ports on the way, was to raise funds for fitting all large life-boats with engines. On 28th August, the *William and Kate Johnston* visited Aberdeen. (168) If the Harbour Commissioners cast envious eyes on her as she lay in Aberdeen harbour, their envy was compounded with shame in October. That month the greater effectiveness of a motor life-boat in especially heavy seas was made clear at the thirteen-hour contest between man and sea around the *Imperial Prince*. The arguments for a motor life-boat were barely refutable now. The Harbour Commissioners lacked the funds to provide one. The logic of handing over to the R.N.L.I. was finally inescapable.

This should not be taken as a general condemnation of local services and an advertisement for centralised, national control. The local service was flexible enough to adapt to local circumstances; witness the redesigned life-boat carriage. Small can be beautiful. It can also be restrictive. When a major change from pulling boats to motor boats became essential, the locals had neither the will nor the means to» carry out such a radical improvement. The local service worked effectively within its own limitations. Its efficient use came about through the dedication of a relatively few men, rather than some Aberdeen genius for managing their own affairs better than anyone else could. The advantages of a small-scale operation are a product of its size. They are not a product of the imaginary superiority of those who run the operation.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The story of the Aberdeen life-saving service can be read in a number of ways. For some readers it will be a saga of heroes and villains, the squalid and the saintly, the gallant Fittie pilots abused or sent out in storms by careless businessmen and bureaucrats. Yet this picture is too stark in its contrasts. Among the business community there are a number of examples of selfless concern for saving lives at sea. The Halls, with their advice on a better life-saving service; the Duthies and Walter Hood, who helped at all the mid-century rescues; Mr Wyllie, who forced open the life-boathouse door with a crowbar; Mr Adamson, who saved a number of stranded ships' crews — these men were members of the business community. It is notable, however, that only William Duthie was ever a Harbour Commissioner, and that he tried hard to get the R.N.L.I. into Aberdeen as early as 1874-75. If the local businessmen had their pillars of the community they also had their enemies of the people. Some of the Aberdeen sailing vessels that came ashore broke up surprisingly quickly. The *Armitstead* comes to mind, breaking up in about an hour. The Aberdeen shipowners may not have been deliberately scheming for a fat insurance claim on a wrecked vessel. But some of them at least cared little for the lives of the sailors going out in their rotten brigs and schooners. Captain Longmuir's sharp criticisms during the *Venus-Armitstead* post-mortem were aimed at Aberdeen shipowners as much as those elsewhere.

While the business community at the harbour had its saints and sinners on matters of safeguarding life at sea, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners had a statutory responsibility to provide life-saving equipment and competent crews to work it. Sections 16 and 17 of the 'Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act, 1847' disqualified the Aberdeen Harbour Board from levying rates *unless* they provided an efficient, fully-operational, properly-manned life-saving service. The Commissioners fulfilled that responsibility only after twenty seven lives had been lost in 1852-53. Moreover, for a long period before the 1847 Act, they left Aberdeen entirely without a life-boat. They bought one only after their own Shoremaster persistently brought up the matter. After it was bought, they antagonised and alienated the most skilled potential life-boatmen at the harbour, by refusing for over a decade to pay the Fittie pilots a regular retainer. Even after the shake-up of 1853-54, the Commissioners negligently allowed the quality of the life-saving service to deteriorate. In 1874, when the Stonehaven life-boat went over, the regulations governing the ready

availability of a steam tug were being ignored. By 1923, the Commissioners were using life-boats whose effectiveness had been surpassed by more sophisticated vessels.

In our story, the Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners' behaviour can be understood as penny-pinching ineptitude. The reluctance to spend money and the concern to keep expenses down are repeated themes in this tale. The Commissioners, who were drawn largely from among the town councillors, were responsible for maintaining, operating and extending the harbour as efficiently and cheaply as possible. In doing so, they were serving the interests of their property-owning electors. That meant minimising expenditure in order to keep harbour rates low. The Commissioners, then, operated under the twin obligations to save money and to save lives. Some may accuse them of emphasising the former at the expense of the latter. Others may see them as typically fallible men. They corrected their mistakes when these proved too costly in human lives and they heeded expert advice when it could contribute to an above-average life-saving service. For a decade or so after the tragedies of 1852-53, Aberdeen had an exceptionally well-equipped, well-trained life-saving service — arguably the best in Britain and certainly the best in Scotland. When new equipment was required, or some modification needed to improve the existing gear, the Commissioners readily consulted local shipbuilders, shipowners, shipmasters and their own officials. Expert local advice helped provide a clinker-built life-boat of exceptional strength; a whole range of life-line apparatus stationed strategically at danger spots; a life-boat carriage which was specially designed to haul easily over Aberdeen's sandy beach; and a set of regulations which painstakingly anticipated all those delays which could hamper a speedy rescue.

This image of the Harbour Commissioners as benevolent paternalists who readily and appropriately deferred to expert advice is perhaps too generous to them. They sometimes accepted misleading advice which fell in with their own desire to spend as little as possible. In 1850-51, on the advice of the Captain Pilot, they took away the annual retainer they had just granted the Fittie pilots. Deeply offended at the Commissioners' give-and-take miserliness, the Fittie men stood back, arms folded, while the *Venus* and *Armitstead* came ashore with the loss of eleven lives. The Harbour Board also relied too long on the advice of Harbour Master Crombie. In the period 1900-1920, his repeated insistence on a local life-boat service suited the Commissioners' unwillingness to spend large sums on modernising the life-saving facilities at Aberdeen. As long as they retained the local service, the Commissioners could keep a tighter rein on what it cost them. But by 1923 the inefficiency of their service in extreme conditions could not

be hidden from the public as easily as it was in 1852-53. In the mid-19th century, the Commissioners, with the support of local shipowners who feared too searching an investigation of the past, had been able to fend off too lengthy a criticism of their carelessness. In 1923, the popular taunts of the heckler at Sunnybank School may have made some Commissioners squirm. In the period 1853-1923, the relationship betwen the elector and his elected representative had swung, a little, in favour of the elector. If his criticisms hit a bare berve-end, and attracted a good deal of sympathy, his representatives could be goaded into some face-saving action. In all this, the Harbour Commissioners can be seen as fallible human beings — no more prone to error and no more culpable than any others. Or they can be depicted as business-minded men who seldom acted spontaneously to save human life. They only reacted, too late, to the loss of life.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this story is the intense ill-feeling between the Harbour Commissioners and the Fittie pilots in the 1830's and 1840's. Equally intriguing is the question of its source. The antipathy may have had its origin in 19th century social divisions. For most of the century seamen and fishermen were regarded as an improvident, irresponsible, uneducated and ignorantly superstitious lot. These general prejudices about seagoing communities were aggravated by the special features of the relationship between the Fittie folk and Aberdonians. The Fittie folk shared the distinct dialect of the north-east fishing communities; they rarely married with 'toonsers'; they were cut off from the rest of the town by the windowless outer walls of their squares; and the usual fleeting contact between middle-class Aberdeen and the fishers was the fishwife's weekly call at the doorstep. Despite this gulf of mutual incomprehension, well-heeled Aberdonians showed none of the aversion, fear and hostility towards Fittie folk that the 19th century middle classes reserved for the amorphous mass of the industrial working class. (169) Social antipathy was never as pronounced as to explain all the differences between the Fittie men and the harbour authorities.

The penny-pinching attitudes of the Harbour Commissioners in the 1840's may have contributed to the lack of good-feeling. The Commissioners' meanness was not the expression of some inbred local characteristic — the Aberdonian's reputed tight-fistedness — but a necessary expedient because Aberdeen Harbour was so deeply in debt. By 1830, as a result of major reconstruction work at the harbour, the harbour managers were in debt to the tune of £113,000; with annual harbour receipts only about £12,000. Their long-term indebtedness, and local accusations of irresponsible over-spending, made the harbour authorities anxious to save money by cutting as many corners as

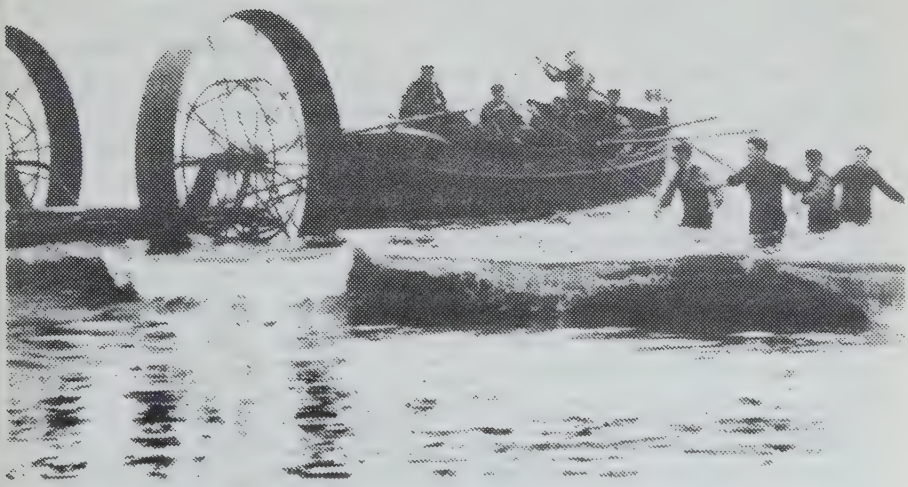
possible. Even so, the sum they made on not paying the life-boat crew could not have amounted to more than £50 a year — a trivial saving which earned them a good deal of unpopularity because it contributed to the life-boat's inefficiency. The Harbour Commissioners' meanmindedness towards the pilots was less the cause of the two groups' antipathies than a symptom of a cultural and organisational gap be tween them. It is this gap which most fully explains the ill-feeling between the pilots and the harbour managers.

19th-century industrialisation and modernisation carried with them the regulation and stricter organisation of people's daily lives and occupations. Yet large sections of British society cherished, or continued to lead, an independent life; organised round the seasons and the weather rather than dictated by the hour and minute hands of the clock. The antipathy between pilots and harbour managers was part of this wider 19th-century conflict between an industrial and a traditional culture. As the harbour was steadily modernised and better regulated in the early decades of the 19th century, the expectations of its managers clashed with those of the pilots. Until the early 1800's the pilots had managed their work themselves and been answerable to no superiors for their conduct. When the first Harbour Trustees were appointed in 1810 they straightaway deplored the 'want of Regulations established by authority for the conduct of those pilots who have been frequently found to be remiss, carefree and negligent in their duty and sometimes unreasonable in their charges.' After 1810 only those boatmen authorised, licensed and properly examined by the harbour authorities could act as harbour pilots. Even so, the pilots' status remained an odd one. They were not harbour employees but self-employed — providing their own boats and operating under licence. The Fittie pilots, a discrete, semi-independent group of one and a half dozen men, were not easily subjected to work discipline.

The authorities wanted an ordered work force, punctual, subservient, tractable, subject to the minutiae of rules and regulations. The pilots, on the other hand, coming from a seafaring background, were not amenable to such a regimen. They jealously guarded their position as the aristocracy of Fittie labour; they preserved their comparative independence as strictly as possible. This divide between licenced, self-employed pilots and the authorities who regulated their work spilled over into the life-boat service. The harbour managers thought that crewing the life-boat should be an unpaid obligation, written into the rule book, rather than a voluntary commitment. The pilots wanted an annual retainer and a volunteer crew. There were faults on both sides. As the 1840's proved, (witness the 'missing keys' incident when the *Velocity* was wrecked in 1848), the want of proper regulations made

for an inefficient life-boat system. On the other hand, when the authorities denied the pilots an annual fee, they were depriving the life-boat of a trainable, regular crew. In the 1840's, the life-boat service suffered from the intransigence of both sides. When the authorities eventually relented in 1849, by granting the annual retainer, they compounded their earlier tight-fistedness by high-handedly withdrawing the fee a year later. This penny-pinching prevarication stirred up such animosity in the houses at Fittie that the fishermen sided unswervingly with the pilots in refusing to man the life-boat when the *Venus* and the *Armitstead* came ashore in November 1852.

If this is a story of human limitations, it is also an epic of how humankind can rise above its own frailties. The Fittie pilots who manned the life-boats were no virtuous angels. Some would fault them for their lack of Christian charity in refusing to go out to the *Tinker* in 1842, the *Velocity* in 1848, the *Isabella* in 1849 and the *Venus* and *Armitstead* in 1852. In demanding a fee for taking out the life-boat, the Fittie men were not being heartlessly mercenary. Whenever they stood by the life-boat or went out in an emergency, they could not earn their living piloting. When they did settle their differences with the Harbour Board in late 1852, there was no doubting the Fittie men's bravery. The courage to go out in a life-boat is not the adrenalin-burst of heroism



Beach life-boat 'Bon-Accord I' being launched.
(photo courtesy of Aberdeen Journals Ltd.)

which a soldier may display in battle. It is each life-saver's triumph over his own calculation that the odds in a storm favour nature's violence rather than human strength. The life-saver's resources of courage and endurance can be called on for hours, moreover, not minutes. This is the coldly calculated courage of the person who shares a common natural adversary with his/her fellows. The life-saver's courage can be played down as selfish altruism. The occasional rationalisation of the life-boatman for his actions is: 'If I were stuck out there in a gale, I would want somebody to come out for me.' But this self-centredness about helping others does not take away from a person's bravery. Most of us would wish to be saved in a gale. Not all of us would go out in a life-boat to save others. The cynic's view of bravery devalues the cynical, not the courageous.

Anyone who goes out in a life-boat in a storm is brave, whether it is the bravery of the unimaginative and foolhardy or the quiet self-asurance of the risk-taker. Aberdeen's maritime history gives account of such human courage. 'Dycie' joined the life-boat service at the age of twenty two and was still going out as coxswain when he was fifty eight. He was a shrewd life-saver as well as a skilled boatman. After the Stonehaven life-boat disaster in 1874, some of the rescues which he mounted are remarkable for their promptness and the speedy return of the life-boat. In October 1875, Coxswain Paterson and his crew brought five men ashore from the *Isabella Millar*, only two to three minutes after she grounded. In December 1877, had 'Dycie' been slow in reaching the schooner *Nina*, all seven of her crew would have been lost when she quickly disintegrated. The early steam-tug men took out their frail paddle tugs in fierce storms and filled the gap when there was no life-boat or the sea was too rough for an oar-driven boat. Later, sturdier steam tugs would tow the life-boat to the scene of a shipwreck — the tugmen sharing the life-boatmen's peril. Numerous individual acts of bravery probably never reached the newspaper columns. Aboard the wrecked ships themselves, passengers and crew often behaved courageously. Chief Steward Duncan Christie aboard the *Duke of Sutherland* on April Fool's Day 1853 was responsible for saving a number of lives by his successful management of the rescue. There are heroines as well as heroes. Six or seven women deliberately stayed aboard that same wreck to tie the men into the slings. Men have no momopoly on courage.

The story of the Aberdeen life-saving service is a history of humanity at its best and second-best. Gathering that story together shows how the style of newspaper reporting changed. In the early 19th-century, the 'Aberdeen Journal''s accounts of a wreck and rescue are spartan and skeleton. The following, from 1810, is not untypical: 'On Thursday

last the brig *Hope, Alexander Morrison*, of and for this place, from Sunderland, in attempting the harbour with little wind and a heavy sea, was thrown ashore on the south side of the entrance. The Life Boat was immediately launched, and pulling off through the tremendous breakers, succeeded in bringing the crew safely ashore.....' (170) By the mid-19th century, as newspapers increased in size, reporters and editors came to appreciate the public interest in shipwrecks. Accounts of the more vivid rescues were now a half-column to a column long. The reporters were knowledgeable men who understood how a ship was sailed, could explain the difficult currents at Aberdeen harbour and knew how the rescue service should operate. Their accounts are detailed, often exciting and always very informative. Thankfully, they lack the breathless sensationalism and purple prose which characterises the journalism of the late-19th century and beyond.

One example of this sensationalised reporting, admittedly rather extreme, refers to the distressed vessel being 'literally bowled onto the sand..... In an instant the lifeboat was removed from the carriage and bravely launched into the boiling surf. Away went the boat, dancing over the waves, pulled by strong and gallant hands.' (171) Fortunately, this particular reporter covered no more shipwrecks. Or perhaps his style improved with editorial criticism. A new fashion in reporting wrecks and rescues came in during the last decade of the 19th century. The journalist's own lengthy, general report was followed by several eye-witness accounts headed, 'The Skipper's Story', 'Work of the Lifeboatmen', The Coxswain's Story', etc. These accounts were often at odds with each other, with completely different versions of events being given. The reporter was content to reproduce these different versions. He made no attempt to coordinate their information and produce an accurate summary of events in his own column-length report. The historian has to accept that he will never achieve any final, accurate account of what took place at a rescue. There are as many different descriptions of any shipwreck as there are of a car crash.

The last important question about Aberdeen's own life-saving service is: how many lives *did* it save? The typewritten list compiled in the early 1930's gives 535 persons saved by the *Bon-Accord I* between 1846 and 1924. The *Bon-Accord II* is credited with 139 lives saved between 1881 and 1923. The total is 674 lives saved, 1846-1924. Andrew Baxter, 'The Fittie Historian', repeats this figure. The list is not an accurate one and its recorded figures should not be repeated without question. For one thing, there was a life-boat or some sort of rescue service at Aberdeen between 1802 and 1846. But no accurate tally is taken of the people saved in those forty four years. By not taking these earlier rescues into account, the list credits the Aberdeen

life-saving service with saving fewer lives than it actually did. On the other hand, the list exaggerates and misrepresents the number of lives saved on different occasions. For example, in October 1859 the thirty passengers and crew of the steamer *Duke of Richmond* got ashore at the Black Dog by their own efforts, before the life-boat arrived. Again, the trawler *Loch Laggan* went aground and tilted over in the harbour channel in September 1908, but her crew stayed aboard and did not require the life-boat's services. Yet the list claims nine lives saved and carries the remark: 'Crew and vessel saved by life-boat and tug.' Whoever compiled the list also consistently increased, by one, the number of lives saved at each rescue. The author of the list was not increasing the number dishonestly, in order to boost local pride in the Aberdeen life-saving service. He seems to have genuinely misunderstood that when an account in the Harbour Office's Casualties Book gave 'five of a crew' or 'eight of a crew', that figure *included* the captain. There was no need to add one to the figure in the Casulaties Book in order to arrive at the exact number of men saved.

These occasional minor exaggerations could mount up over the years to produce an inflated figure for the total of lives saved. 'Dycie', perhaps stronger on courage than he was on accuracy, produces one of these exaggerated totals. When he gave evidence at the Board of Trade enquiry in March 1874, he claimed to have been involved in saving 275 lives during his seventeen years with the life-boat. But an accurate figure for lives saved in the period 1857 to 1874 is no more than two hundred and more likely to have been one hundred and fifty to one hundred and seventy. It is extremely difficult to be any more accurate. For this and other periods, there is no easily traceable journalistic record of some of the rescue missions given in the typed list. The dating of a number of rescue missions is wrong. Some can be traced by diligent searching. Others may have the wrong month or even year attached to them. Without a record of the lives saved at these missing rescues, it is impossible to produce an accurate revised figure. For example, the vessel *William Coulman* is recorded as running ashore on the beach on 22nd March 1871. The life-boat is credited with saving sixteen lives. The 'Aberdeen Journal' has no account of such a wreck or rescue. It is impossible to deny the existence of the shipwreck and refuse credit to the life-boat crew for saving sixteen lives. It is equally impossible to credit them with sixteen — the real figure may have been fifteen. The historian may be convinced that the total of 674 lives saved is inaccurate. But he cannot say if the true figure is more or less than that. If the numbers saved in the missing period 1802-1845 are taken into account, they might balance out the exaggerations, some major, some minor, of the period 1846-1924.

If that were the case, a total of six hundred to seven hundred lives saved would be acceptable enough, so long as it is realised that this figure includes the lives saved by the Alexander Baxter/Shipmasters' Society life-boat and by the steam tugs.

These arithmetical quibbles are not important, however. Even if only one life had been saved in the one hundred and twenty one years of the Aberdeen life-saving service, its existence would have been justified. That alone would have been a worthwhile achievement. If the service saved six hundred to seven hundred lives, it is a pity that it did not save more. They were there to be saved in 1852, 1853, 1874 and 1923. The failure to do so is no fault of the Fittie pilots. The fault lies with those who penny-pinched to save money. There was much cause for pride among the Fittie life-boatmen. There is less to be proud of in the city's management of the life-saving service. Some Aberdonians see their city's maritime past as another excuse for self-inflating, self-congratulatory civic pride. These are the people who boast proudly of the *Thermopylae* being an Aberdeen-built ship, with fine clipper-building taken as another reason for claiming Aberdeen's superiority over other cities. Usually, these civic propaganda-makers can only understand the history of the sea as something romantic and glamorous. For instance, less than six years after Aberdeen's own service was wound up, an article in the 'Press and Journal' was headed: 'Romance of the Lifeboat Service. Distinction of the North of Scotland. Aberdeen's Niche.' (172) There is nothing romantic about the story told in these pages. The city's establishment can lay no claim on this tale in order to boast about its superior management of Aberdeen's affairs. History, real history as opposed to myth and propaganda, has a way of revenging itself on those who use it for political purposes.

APPENDIX 1

'Aberdeen Harbour. Regulations for the Captain Pilot, the Assistant Captain Pilot, the Pilots, Rates of Fare for Pilotage, the Life-Boats, and Life-saving Apparatus at the Harbour of Aberdeen', 3rd August 1853.

LIFE BOATS AND CREW THEREOF

1 The Boats are to be kept in perfect readiness for use, either in the Houses or otherwise, as the Captain Pilot may direct, and the Boats are always to be kept on their Carriages, except when ordered at any time to be afloat.

2 Keys to the Boat-Houses shall be labelled and kept at the Captain Pilot's Office, at each of the Shipbuilding Yards, at the Dock-master's Office, Dock Gates, at the Harbour Office, at the Town House, and at the Police Watch House.

3 The Life Boat crew shall be selected and Licenced by the Captain Pilot of the Port, and shall consist of a Master, Mate, and 10 Boatmen. The names of the Parties, as Licenced, shall be entered by the Captain Pilot in a Book to be kept by him at the Pilot Office.

4 The salary of the Master shall be £5, Mate £4, and each of the Crew £3 yearly, and be payable half-yearly.

5 In the absence of the Master, the Mate shall take charge, and the men take their places in the Boats as directed by the Master of the Boat for the time.

The firing of a Mortar on the North Pier, or at Torry, will be the signal for the Life Boat's Crew immediately to assemble, and launch and man the Life Boats; and they shall give every assistance, and obey such directions as may be given to them by the Captain Pilot, or Assistant Captain Pilot, in reference to the other Life-preserving Apparatus.

6 As the efficiency of a Life Boat depends on the good training and discipline of the Crew, the strictest attention must be paid by them to the directions of the Captain Pilot and Assistant Captain Pilot, and Master and Mate of the Boat, on all occasions connected with the service. One of the Boats shall be taken afloat for exercise, fully manned, at least once a-quarter, giving the preference to blowing weather; and at all times when the Life Boat has to be sent out to sea, whether for exercise or for the purpose of saving life, the Captain, Mate and Crew of the Boat shall carefully return the Boats, with their stores and equipments, to the respective Boat Houses, and the Captain Pilot and Assistant Captain Pilot shall be

in attendance, and see that, according to the inventory thereof, this is done; and they shall also ascertain that the Boats, with their Carriages, equipments, and stores, are in proper order. If repairs are necessary, or if any of the Stores be awanting, the Captain of the Boat shall report the same to the Captain Pilot, who shall give the necessary instructions in the matter.

The Life Boats are not to be used for taking off anchors or cables, stores, &c., but shall be used, with their establishments, for the purpose of rendering assistance to vessels in distress within, or near to the said Harbour.

Extracted from the Minutes of the Parliamentary Commissioners of the Harbour of Aberdeen, by

JOHN ANGUS, Clerk

Harbour Office,
Aberdeen, 3d August, 1853

APPENDIX 2

RESCUES AT ABERDEEN, 1802—1844

DATE & VESSEL	LIVES SAVED
7 March 1804 : *Hawk*	whole crew (number unknown)
15 January 1805 : *Thetis*	whole crew (number unknown)
15 March 1808 : *William*	whole crew (number unknown)
19 September 1808 : *a fishing yawl*	two
20 October 1808 : *Peggy*	all crew & 4 passengers
25 October 1808 : *Alert*	whole crew (number unknown)
18 February 1809 : *Arethusa*	whole crew (number unknown)
17 December 1809 : *Fortune*	crew, less drowned mate
5 April 1810 : *Hope*	whole crew (number unknown)
30 January 1812 : *John*	whole crew (number unknown)
23 November 1814 : *Princess Royal*	30
26 January 1815 : *Charsten & Peter*	5 saved, mate crushed to death
30 October 1817 : *Gibraltar*	whole crew (number unknown)
15 November 1817 : *Fame*	crew, less drowned mate
15 November 1817 : *James and Mary*	whole crew (number unknown)
3 January 1818 : *Expedition*	all of crew lost
2 March 1820 : *Perfect*	whole crew (number unknown)
1 March 1821 : *James*	all 27 crew
18 January 1825 : *Deveron*	crew, less drowned mate
4 March 1828 : *3 fishing boats*	all crews saved
21 March 1829 : *Hind*	whole crew (number unknown)
16 August 1829 : *Lord Archibald Hamilton*	whole crew (number unknown)
21 January 1830 : *Fame*	9 crew & 7 passengers saved, 2 crew lost
22 January 1830 : *Grampian*	4 crew saved
20 February 1831 : *Margarets*	2 crew saved
6 February 1832 : *Pirate*	whole crew (number unknown)
8 February 1833 : *a pilot boat*	4 saved, 2 lost
25 May 1833 : *a salmon coble*	4 saved, 1 drowned
1 November 1833 : *a Norway skiff*	1 man on board saved
22 February 1835 : *Marquis of Huntly*	all crew & passengers saved
25 September 1835 : *Olive Branch*	whole crew (number unknown)
23 November 1836 : *Hind*	whole crew (number unknown)
12 December 1839 : *Brilliant*	Captain drowned, rest of crew and all passengers saved

22 January 1842 : *Tinker*	whole crew (number unknown)
1 April 1842 : *a fishing boat*	1 crewman saved, 5 others drowned
8 January 1844 : *9 fishing boats*	53 fishermen saved
24 February 1844 : *Newcastle*	all passengers & crew saved
4 November 1844 : *Frau Arnkalina*	all three of crew saved

APPENDIX 3

THREE LIFE-BOAT CREW LISTS

1859

William Baxter, William Smith, Alexander Fowler, Pearson Morrice Alexander Baxter, Andrew Walker, John Guyan, James Morrice Alexander Paterson, Alexander Watson, Alexander Baxter, Andrew Smith, Alexander Noble

1896

Alexander Noble, *master*, Alexander Meres, *mate*, Alexander Main, James Guyan, James Fowler, Alexander Hunter, George Noble, Alexander Paterson, Alexander Guyan, Robert Walker, Alexander Watson, John Morrice

1920

Alexander Guyan, *coxswain*, George Noble, *bowman*, Thomas Sinclair, Alexander Allan, Andrew Paterson, Andrew Caie, Robert Hodge, Andrew Fowler, John Meres, George Flett

FOOTNOTES:

1 This list was drawn up by someone at the Aberdeen Harbour Board offices. At a guess it was produced sometime in the late 1920's, early 1930's.
2 See A.D. Farr, *Let Not The Deep: The Story of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution* (Aberdeen, 1973); E.C. Fry, *Life-boat Design and Development* (Newton Abbot, 1975)
3 See *Aberdeen Journal* (hereafter referred to as A.J.), 6,13,20, 27 January and 10 February 1800, p.4
4 For details of these rescues and the lives saved, see Appendix 1
5 A.J., 26 October 1808, p.4, col. 4.
6 A.J., 14 January 1818, p.3, cols. 4 & 5
7 See A.J., 29 November 1809, p.4, col. 4
8 See A.J., 21 September 1808, p.4, col. 3; 26 October 1808, p.4, col.4; 22 February 1809, p.4, col.4; 1 February 1815, p.3, col.4
9 See A.J., 19 November 1817, p.3, col.4
10 See A.J., 8 March 1820, p.3, col.5
11 See Aberdeen Harbour Minutes (hereafter referred to as H.M.), Vol.8, p.19v
12 See A.J., 15 January 1834, p.3, col.3
13 See A.J., 19 September 1827, p.3, col.4
14 A.J., 26 January 1825, p.3, col.5
15 A.J., 19 September 1827, p.3, col.4
16 See A.J., 19 August 1829, p.3, col.5
17 See A.J., 27 January 1830, p.3, col.5
18 A.J., 13 February 1822, p.3, col.5
19 See A.J., 27 January 1830, p.3, col.5
20 See A.J., 18 December 1839, p.3, col.3
21 See A.J., 29 August 1827, p.3, col.3
22 See A.J., 12 March 1828, p.3, col.5
23 See A.J., 25 March 1829, p.3, col.5
24 See A.J., 18 June 1834, p.3, col.6
25 See A.J., 19 August 1835, p.3, col.3
26 See A.J., 30 September 1835, p.3, col.5
27 H.M., Vol.8, p.19v
29 See A.J., 12 & 19 September 1838, p.3, col.3 & p.3, col.6
29 See H.M., Vol.8, p.67v
30 The Visiting Committee was responsible for visiting the harbour area periodically, inspecting the different operations going on there and making any appropriate suggestions or recommendations to the Trustees
31 See Aberdeen Harbour Letter Book (hereafter referred to as H.L.B.), No.1, pp 246-248
32 See A.J., 3 March 1841
33 See H.M., Vol.8, pp.149-151 & 154

34 See A.J., 26 January 1842
35 See A.J., 15 January 1834, p.3, col.3
36 See A.J., 2 February 1842, p.3, col.4
37 See A.J., 10 January 1844, p.3, col.3
38 See A.J., 28 February 1844, p.3, cols.2-3
39 See A.J., 6 November 1844, p.3, col.3
40 See A.J., 15 October 1845, p.3, col.4
41 See A.J., 27 December 1848, p.5, col.2
42 A.J., 25 October 1848, p.5, col.1
43 The 'Trustees for the Improvement of the Harbour' had been renamed the 'Harbour Commissioners'
44 On this occasion the life-boat was manned by three ships' captains, a Mr Douglas, one of the Halls and some pilots. See A.J., 17 January 1849, p.5, cols. 1-2
45 See H.M., Vol.11, p.88r
46 A.J., 1 December 1852, p.8, col.4
47 A.J., 8 December 1852, p.5, col.2
48 A.J., 8 December 1852, p.5, col.3
49 See A.J., 8 December 1852, p.5, col.4
50 See the remarks of Mr A. Nicol, Mr N. Smith and Captain Longmuir, A.J., 8 December 1852, p.5, col.4
51 See A.J., 6 April 1853
52 See A.J., 6 April 1853
53 A.J., 6 April 1853
54 See A.J., 13 April 1853, p.5, col.4
55 See A.J., 13 April 1853, p.5, col.1
56 See A.J., 13 April 1853, p.5, cols.2-3
57 See A.J., 13 April 1853, p.5, cols.2-3
58 See A.J., 25 May 1853
59 See A.J., 4 May 1853, p.5, col.2
60 This document was known as the 'Regulations for the Captain Pilot, the Assistant Captain Pilot, the Pilots, Rates of Fare for Pilotage, the Life-boats and Life-preserving Apparatus at the Harbour of Aberdeen'. For the regulations governing the life-boat service, see Appendix 1.
61 See A.J., 28 September 1853, p.5, col.3; 12 October 1853, p.5, col.5; 19 October 1853, p.5, col.3
62 See A.J., 8 June 1853, p.4, col.4 & p.5, col.1; 28 September 1853, p.5, col.3
63 See A.J., 11 January 1854, p.5, col.2 & H.M., Vol.12, p.80r
64 See H.M., Vol.12, p.87v
65 See A.J., 12 October 1853, p.5, col.5
66 See A.J., 27 October 1858, p.7, col.3; R. Lewis, *History of the Life-boat and its Work* (London, 1874)
67 See A.J., 11 January 1854, p.5, col.2
68 See A.J., 23 January 1867, p.4, col.5
69 See A.J., 11 January 1854, p.5, cols.2-3

70 See A.J., 7 January 1857, p.4, col.6
71 See A.J., 27 May 1857, p.5, col.1
72 See A.J., 15 December 1858, p.4, col.6
73 See A.J., 12 January 1859, p.4, col.6
74 See A.J., 16 February 1859, p.4, col.6
75 See A.J., 12 October 1859, p.8, col.6
76 See A.J., 25 January 1860, p.5, col.1
77 See A.J., 11 December 1861, p.5, col.3
78 See A.J., 18 March 1863, p.4, col.6 & 25 March 1863, p.5, col.4
79 See A.J., 7 March 1866, p.4, col.4
80 See A.J., 14 April 1868, p.8, col.4
81 See A.J., 25 March 1874, p.5, col.2
82 See the testimony of Captain Patrick, A.J., 1 April 1874 p.6, col.1
83 See the testimony of William Clark, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
84 See the testimony of Alexander Paterson, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.2
85 The testimony of Captain Patrick, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
86 The testimony of William Clark, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
87 The testimony of William Clark, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
88 See the testimony of Hardgraves Hanson, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
89 A.J., 4 March 1874, p.3, col.4
90 See the testimony of Edwin Stevensen, A.J., 18 March 1874, p.8, cols. 4-5
91 A.J., 4 March 1874, p.3, col.4
92 H.M., Vol.18, pp.343-344
93 H.M., Vol.18, p.349
94 The testimony of William Clark, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.1
95 See the testimony of Alexander Paterson, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.2
96 See the testimony of Alexander Mitchell, A.J., 25 March 1874, p.5, col.1
97 The testimony of J.W. Barclay, A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.2
98 A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, cols.3-4; also H.M., Vol.18, pp.346-350
99 See A.J., 1 April 1874, p.6, col.4
100 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.115 & 119
101 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.131-132
102 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.188-190 & 193-195
103 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.267 & 297
104 See A.J., 29 September 1875
105 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.105-107 & Vol.20, p.56; A.J., 5 December 1876, p.2, col.7
106 See Aberdeen Harbour Board file: 'Lifeboats' (hereafter referred to as A.H.B.), handwritten sheet of notes
107 See H.M., Vol.19, pp.141 & 195
108 See A.J., 20 October 1875, p.7, col.2
109 See A.J., 27 October 1875, p.3, cols. 2-3

110 See A.J., 15 November 1876, p.6, col.6
111 See A.J., 31 January 1877, p.3, col.5
112 See A.J., 12 December 1877, p.3, col.7
113 See A.J., 16 February 1880, p.5, col.2
114 See A.J., 20 December 1880, p.5, col.1
115 See A.J., 7 March 1881, p.5, col.1
116 See A.J., 21 November 1881, p.5, col.2
117 See A.J., 7 December 1881, p.5, col.2
118 See A.J., 26 December 1881, p.4, col.6
119 See A.J., 15 January 1883, p.2, col.6
120 See A.J., 12 February 1883, p.2, col.7
121 See A.J., 31 March 1883, p.2, col.6
122 The *Queen* probably came ashore between half past three and four o'clock. The life-boat was out at her for almost an hour and would have got back to the beach at around 4.45a.m. The *Tom Duff* struck not long after 5a.m.
123 See A.J., 31 March 1883, p.2, col.7
124 See A.J., 19 December 1893, p.4, col.6
125 See A.J., 20 October 1893, p.5, col.1
126 See A.J., 7 August 1900, p.4, col.6
127 See A.J., 2 October 1890, p.5, col.1
128 See A.J., 15 July 1893, p.5, col.1
129 See A.J., 14 February 1896, p.4, col.6
130 See A.J., 29 & 30 November 1897, p.5, col.2 & p.6, col.1
131 See A.J., 30 November 1900, p.5, col.6 & 1 December 1900, p.5, col.1
132 See A.J., 24 December 1901, p.4, cols.1-2
133 See A.J., 3 December 1902, p.5, col.8
134 See A. Baxter, *Some Reminiscences of Fittie: History, Industrial, Educational, Religious, Personal* (Aberdeen, no date)
135 Extract from an anonymous letter written by a former Fittie resident to Dr Brian Taylor, formerly of the Sociology Department, Aberdeen University. Dr Taylor's research on Fittie's past received some publicity and he received the letter on 17 April 1974.
136 See A.J., 10 February 1904, p.4, col.6
137 See A.J., 8 March 1904, p.4, col.7
138 See A.J., 6 November 1905, p.4, col.8
139 See A.J., 30 December 1905, p.4, col.7
140 See A.J., 12 September 1908, p.4, col.6
141 A.J., 30 December 1908, p.6, col.1
142 See A.J., 27 October 1909, p.4, col.6
143 See A.J., 18 January 1912, p.8, col.1
144 See A.J., 19 January 1912, p.8, cols.1-3
145 See A.J., 10 January 1913, p.8, col.3
146 See A.J., 18 January 1913, p.6, col.4
147 See A.J., 13 January 1913, p.7, cols.5-7

148 See A.H.B. file: 'Lifeboats', Report by Docks and Pilotage Committee. Private. 6/3/13
149 See A.H.B. file: 'Lifeboats'. John Cormack to Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners, March 1918
150 See A.J., 11 March 1920, p.4, col.7 & 20 March 1920, p.6, col.4
151 See A.J., 30 July 1921, p.4, col.8
152 See A.J., 15 April 1922, p.4, col.6
153 See A.J., 2 October 1922, p.5, col.6
154 A.J., 20 October 1923, p.7, cols.7-8
155 Details provided by George Flett
156 A.J., 20 October 1923, p.7, col.8
157 A.J., 26 October 1923, p.6, col.8
158 H.M., Vol.39, p.126
159 See H.M., Vol.40, pp.39-40, 48-49 & 79
160 See A.J., 8 December 1923, p.6, col.8 & 11 December 1923, p.7, col.6
161 See A.J., 1 September 1908, p.4, col.6
162 See H.M., Vol.10, pp.13,97 & 153
163 See A.J., 3 January 1912, p.4, col.4
164 See A.H.B. file: 'Lifeboats'. Report by James A. Ross to the Docks and Pilotage Committee, Aberdeen Harbour Commissioners, Harbour Office, 17 October 1911
165 See A.H.B. file: 'Lifeboats'
166 Interview with Daisy Guyan, Fittie. 29/7/80
167 See A.H.B. file: 'Lifeboats'
168 See *The Scotsman*, 13 August 1923
169 See the complimentary comments by John Robertson, 'Notes on the Fishers of the Scotch East Coast', *Blackwood's Magazine*, Vol.51, (1842), pp.296-305
170 See A.J., 11 April 1810, p.4, col.5
171 See A.J., 7 March 1881, p.5, col.1
172 See *Press and Journal*, 25 January 1929